



## DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON CREATIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

# CREATIVITY IN SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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### **Purpose**

The purpose of this Working Paper is to promote discussion about creativity in social work education. The intention is to develop a rich picture of the perceptions and insights of higher education educators as to the way the idea of creativity is given meaning and operationalised in the field of social work.

**Readers are invited to develop or add to the propositions and ideas contained in the paper, or add alternative views, so that the paper more accurately reflects understandings about creativity in the thinking and practices in social work.** Please send further contributions to Hilary Burgess [H.C.Burgess@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:H.C.Burgess@bristol.ac.uk).

### **Introduction**

The Higher Education Academy's Imaginative Curriculum project<sup>1</sup> is encouraging higher education teachers and discipline communities to consider the role of creativity in students' learning and their experiences of learning. Underlying this attempt to engage higher education are the working assumptions that:

- Being creative is present in all disciplinary learning contexts, although we rarely use words like creativity to describe such things.
- We all need to be creative (inventive/adaptive) in a world that is constantly changing: a world that requires us also to change/adapt.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/creativity.htm>

- Apart from those disciplines that explicitly recognise creativity as a central feature of their identity (like the performing arts and design), creativity is largely implicit in discussions about teaching and learning. However, teachers do value creativity, originality, flair and imagination in their students' learning. Indeed some teachers believe that creativity is one of the hallmarks of excellence in learning and achievement.

Underlying our project is the desire to show that *creativity is an important part of being*: it is integral to being a biologist, lawyer, historian or, in this case, a social worker or a social work educator. But being creative means different things in these different contexts for being.

To test this proposition an email survey was conducted with the aim of gaining insights into how higher social work educators and social work practitioners understand creativity.

*Questions used to prompt discussion*

Q1. How are social workers creative? What is creative about being a social worker? What sorts of things do social workers do that are creative?

Q2. What is it about the subjects within social work that stimulate and encourage teachers and students to be creative?

Q3. How do teachers of social work help/enable students to be creative? What forms of teaching encourage/enable students to be creative? What contexts/conditions for learning encourage/enable students to be creative?

Q4. How do teachers of social work evaluate students' creativity? How do you assess/reward creativity in social work education? What criteria do you use to evaluate creativity?

Q5 What factors inhibit students' creativity in social work education?

Q6 How important a place do you feel creativity currently occupies in the social work curriculum? Do you feel it is adequately valued?

## **Contexts for creativity in social work and social work education**

*Notes with permission from [http://www.healthcare.ac.uk/content.asp?id\\_Content=575](http://www.healthcare.ac.uk/content.asp?id_Content=575)*

Social workers are required to make difficult decisions and to intervene to change and improve the circumstances of people's lives. They deal with a range of problems and work alongside colleagues in other professions to plan and implement programmes of care and support. They help people to cope and deal with ill health, isolation, poverty, disadvantage, racism and other forms of discrimination. They often work with people in times of crisis to support them and to help them take control of their lives and live more independently. The profession demands maturity and a high level of personal commitment and social workers need to be open-minded and prepared to examine and even change their own attitudes and possible prejudices. It is difficult and challenging work and social workers must have patience, determination and be both physically and emotionally resilient.

Social workers play a key part in a network of services operating within the community, residential, hospital or health related settings. They specialise in areas such as: child and family-care, including child protection work, fostering and adoption; work with offenders or people with substance misuse problems; work with adults with special needs such as learning disabilities, physical or mental health problems; work with elderly people. They work alongside the police, health and education services and increasing numbers of voluntary and independent agencies. The social worker may be an

advocate, negotiating on behalf of the service user, or be making decisions alongside other professionals to protect and prevent harm to vulnerable people.

Social work environments include:

- Local authority social services and health trusts, hospitals and GP practices.
- Schools and other services and settings for young people.
- Residential homes and day centres.
- Voluntary sector social welfare organisations providing family, counselling and drug and alcohol treatment services.
- Prisons, probation, police, youth offending and other criminal justice arenas.
- Services associated with civil courts and family breakdown and divorce proceedings.
- More or less anywhere the need arises.

Since the rise of the competency frameworks and evidence-based practice in Social Work in the 1990s two contrasting approaches to social work education and training have been deployed in the UK. The first, and dominant, focus for education and preparation is on competence to practice. The second recognises that social workers 'need to act creatively in practice, confronted as they are by sets of human circumstance that cannot always be predicted.' The ultimate problem with the competence model is that it oversimplifies the nature of social work or, indeed, any professional activity. An application of core principles from the sociology of the professions helps to make this point. It has been observed (Jamous and Peloille, 1970) that a profession contains two elements, technicality and indeterminacy. A professional needs not only to master the technical aspects of the role (for which the competence model is well-suited) but also have a sufficiently sophisticated repertoire of responses to adjust to a more or less infinite range of circumstances, and the ability to judge what responses are appropriate to a given set of circumstances. That this perspective is applicable to social work has been demonstrated by Sheppard (1994). However, there is currently an overemphasis on the technical aspects of social work practice to the detriment of those areas that require the application of professional judgement (Lybery 2003).

### **Creativity in Social Work** (*participants' responses italicized*)

Ultimately a Social Worker's creativity is motivated by and directed to improving the lives and conditions of the people who need to be helped in society. People and their circumstances are infinitely variable, so cannot be represented by simple formulas or procedures. Much of the creativity of the social worker is directed to understanding and resolving or mediating the complex social problems that arise in unique, difficult and challenging circumstances.

*I think one way in which social workers can be creative is the use themselves (as persons) creatively. Social workers becoming a source of new things through imagination and hope.*

*In social work, creativity means finding imaginative new ways of working with people who are referred or who come for help..... This is in opposition to both the social scientific/determinist view of social work, and the current bureaucratic/managerialist view of the discipline.*

*Each situation a social worker encounters is unique. Whilst some aspects may be held in common every intervention requires creative thinking about solutions that are tailored to individual or family needs.*

*Social Workers are necessarily creative in responding to new scenarios for which formulaic responses are invariably inadequate.*

*Social workers need to respond to unique situations with often limited resources. Networking, supporting families and neighbours and championing new ways of meeting need are all creative responses.*

*They often have to work with people who have unique, or a unique mixture of problems, who may not be seen as a priority by others and therefore require creative combinations of supports and services. Creative thinking, 'out of the box' etc is needed to come up with ideas and proposals which seem relevant to service users' objectives and the remit of agencies (with possibly) something to offer towards resolution of problems or change. SWs have to constantly creatively juggle the balls of possibility and those of non-negotiable. SW theories and models are formed from a flexible creative mix of those from other disciplines. They cannot hide behind the certainty of one major theoretical view or discipline. They hope to create hope, where odds seem stacked against change or improvement. With restrictive budgets, they are often involved in complicated, creative accountancy.*

*I think social work operates (or should be operating) on two levels: 1) our efforts with individuals and families, and 2) our efforts toward addressing and positively impacting social problems more generally. I think that challenging the pathologising positivist paradigm is an essential component of this. Stepping back and examining those taken for granted assumptions and beginning to think in a fundamentally different way requires creativity, among other things.*

*The problems faced by social workers are sufficiently unfamiliar, complex and subtle to require the application of creativity and imagination to resolve them (Clark 1995).*

*Given the many layers and how these layers interact and impact individuals and families, there are far too many factors, converging in far too complex a way, to simply apply a rational, left-brained approach to considering an individual or family's situation and providing an 'informed' response.*

*I think SWs have to be creative all the time as we are constantly confronted by situations we've never been confronted with before and have to help service users find a way out of difficulty. We have to be creative in making use of scarce resources and sometimes in 'getting round' systems. We have to be creative in using ourselves (as that is often all we have got) and in developing our own skills through reflective practice.*

*I think being creative is a state of mind as much as a state of any 'objective' reality. Some people can see creativity in everyday life, others seem to think that creativity is something 'others' (creative types) do.*

*Social workers are creative as they are continually engaged in trying to find imaginative solutions to difficult problems. This often occurs within organisations where there are limited resources that have been set up in particular ways. Services may have to be creatively 'customised' to meet needs. This work should be undertaken with service users so that they are involved in the creative process of finding solutions. Social workers may, for example, communicate with children in ways that could be described as creative e.g. imaginative approaches to 'Life Story Books' or social workers who are chairing statutory reviews of looked-after children may make 'reward certificates' to acknowledge the contribution the child has made in the review or reward them for an activity at school or during leisure time.*

*Social Workers seek to solve human problems. Sometimes there are simple, known ways of problem-solving but often you need to take an unusual step, this is being creative (Donald Schon saw this as a prerequisite of reflective practice). Creativity may be in finding unusual ways to access mainstream schooling or it may be about setting up a new community group. Given that social workers should generally not work with the routine (social work assistants may fill this role), creativity is intrinsic to their work. There is a big tie between creativity and reflective practice concepts (in the literature and in my teaching experiences).*

*I think that social workers are creative in that they take different pictures and understandings of situations and put them together as something new that can help people move forward out of entrenched situations.*

*A good social worker should be able to think laterally when working alongside service users. It may be that resources seem limiting but, particularly when working with young people, social workers can be creative in how they work with them and their families if they are afforded the time to do so. An imaginative social worker, through building up a strong working relationship with their service user, can use their own skills, be they artistic, musical or communicative to enable the service user to work through issues and then encourage them to view the world more proactively. This needs to be linked to knowledge and theory and again the creativity comes from making these links.*

These responses contain within them the ideas of inventing something new or original (new ways of meeting need: new ways of working with people out of difficult situations; solutions for new situations/new scenarios; working with and around complex systems, resourcefulness, new ways of thinking resulting from challenging basic assumptions) and the consequent need for imagination and creativity to support this inventiveness. There is also a belief that social workers help others to re-create their lives by helping them move out of difficult situations or entrenched positions.

They identify a number of contexts for creativity:

- Grappling with unique situations and understanding complex situations and resolving or mediating unique problems.
- Working with the problems of individuals.
- Social problems more generally.
- Engaging and mobilizing service/provider organisations and other forms of support.
- Inventing new services/projects.

A social worker's creativity emerges through social interaction in their particular working/problem solving contexts. This is well illustrated by this respondent.

*The particular area of social work that I was involved in, residential child care, held great potential for creativity. Working with people requires a degree of spontaneity, flexibility and freshness in order to be effective, and I think creativity underlies these things. It's about being responsive to the person and situation (and yourself, to some degree) in the moment. Working with children and young people offered what I found to be a rich context for creatively solving problems, structuring time, or looking at situations. Teaching kids how to play and have fun offered plentiful creative opportunities, as did learning how to structure the more difficult times of the day. For instance, meal times were often hairy, and I made a habit of finding riddles or trivia questions to ask at the table to keep the boys amused. Certain activities were in themselves creative (e.g. arts and crafts), and I often felt in a 'creative zone' when using humour, negotiating a sanction, or just planning a shift. I enjoyed those shifts best when I felt a good, strong creative energy, and I think the kids responded best to that energy as well.*

This story is infused with the idea of communication – through conversation, negotiation, riddles, trivia questions, play, humour, through art and crafts. The social worker cannot begin to understand a person's problem(s) if they cannot communicate in ways that are meaningful and empathise with the individual's situation. Communicating with people whose experiences of life and culture may be very different from their own is a key focus for creativity

*Communication skills require creativity - finding the optimum means for expression for the individuals concerned, which vary considerably depending on the service user.*

*They (social workers) also have to find ways of communicating with those whose ability to do so is impaired for some reason: pictures, music, sound and movement may all have a place.*

*Another key area for creativity is use of a variety of methods that do not just include 'talking interventions' but use tools like drawing, music etc to work with particular groups.*

*A good example in learning disabilities is where social workers have found ways of accessing service user views and putting them down in a care plan in the words, symbols, that are useful to the service user. There exist ideas and guidance but each bit of work in this area will need creativity in thinking how to maximise sharing the report.*

*Also interviewing, artistry of finding the right questions.....*

*Creativity in social work practice often comes through the use of self – these are the same types of creative social skills that make some people popular at parties and as friends etc. They include the ability to use wit and humour to diffuse difficult situations or reframe how a situation or event is conceptualised and understood by those involved. The demonstration of genuine warmth and empathy demands creativity in terms of social skills. Manipulating others to act as you wish them to (and here I am thinking of other professionals, colleagues etc, rather than service users) is also a creative act.*

*Thinking of novel solutions to problems that are not amenable to traditional or usual approaches is a rarer form of creativity – for example, I once worked with a man of 66 years of age who had been a composer throughout his working life, before becoming severely disabled. He wanted to attend a very local and forward-looking day centre for disabled adults where all sorts of creative activities and groups were run but was told his age precluded him (up to 65 only) and that he would have to go to an older person's day centre, an idea that was anathema to him, as a young-feeling 66 year old. It is not ageist to point out that the activities on offer in the older person's day centres held little interest for him and he did not relish mixing almost entirely with people 20 or 30 years his senior. I suggested he approach the centre for younger disabled adults and, rather than present in the role of service user, offer to share his knowledge and skills in classical music in some way. Three years on he was still running a very popular weekly 'Music Appreciation Group' and probably getting much more out of this that he would have done as a passive recipient of services. I felt this was creative thinking on my part and I remain proud of this piece of work.*

## **Creativity and Problem Working**

### ***Is this a fair representation of the nature of problem working in social work?***

The core *problem working process* of the Social Worker is concerned with understanding and resolving or mediating the problems of her clients and securing the resources and support necessary to improve the conditions and situations of her clients. The process is often messy and iterative but for simplicity it might be represented as two stages, each of which requires both competency and creativity that combine to produce professional capability (Lymbery 2003). The initial problem working process is to work out what a client's problems are then the focus shifts to securing the support and resources to resolve or mediate the problem.

Social Workers draw on their creativity during the consultation process particularly when they are confronted with complex non-routine problems and situations. Some of the responses to this survey suggest that unique problems requiring creative solutions are the norm rather than the exception.

Through conversations with their clients, and others in relationships with clients, that require them to both develop trusting relationships while maintaining objectivity, they have to find and understand the problem(s), formulate and test hypotheses about what is wrong and why it is wrong, and develop solutions (possible strategies for dealing with the problems). They must listen carefully to the client's story, facilitate further enquiry through sympathetic questioning and reasoning, and gather factual information to inform their decisions through broader enquiry. The information gathered informs decisions/judgements about possible strategies which are then used to engage service providers and

other sources of support with the objective of securing the best support and resources for the client and perhaps the client's family.

Creativity within the initial problem working process is bound up with thoughtful and empathetic communication and enquiry aimed at facilitating the construction of a narrative that combines the client's story with the clinician's evaluative commentary from which hypotheses are created and tested, and ultimately judgements are made. The way the Social Worker engages with the client depends on their attitude and behaviour, their experiences and how they feel about them and how they respond to questioning. Every client is different and the SW's creativity is used to create the best conditions for the client to tell their story, and for their story to be heard and understood by others who can help resolve the problem.

The Social Worker is a creator and illustrator of stories. She helps people tell their stories in ways that reveal their situations and problems in order that they can be understood/diagnosed and addressed. She captures these stories in the forms that are appropriate and necessary to present her client's case to argue for support on her behalf. Social Workers' creative imagination might be directed to transferring themselves into the situations of the people they are helping in order to understand them better. Creativity is also bound up with the formulation and testing of hypotheses about the problems and their possible solutions, the blending of scientific evidence, socially constructed knowledge (through conversations with clients and others with knowledge of the client) and intuitive knowledge derived from experience.

*Jack Phelan has written about helping children and families to rewrite their personal stories from hopeless, incompetent, unworthy, etc., to hopeful, competent, worthy... He invites us to consider shifting away from trying to change kids' behaviour to helping kids rewrite their personal stories. What a different way of looking at things, but when I look back, it resonates with my own experiences of seeing positive transformation in kids. Helping kids to change their stories involves less talk, and more opportunities to experience themselves differently. Providing and helping them manage these opportunities is pretty sophisticated practice, and requires creativity.*

Social Workers grapple with complex social problems, often in emergent/evolving situations that typically do not have simple solutions. Such problems have to be viewed holistically in order to be understood but interpretations have to be developed on the basis of incomplete evidence. While there are strongly convergent forces and much analytical reasoning within the process there is also a need for imagination and divergent forms of thinking to ensure that all reasonable possibilities are explored. The SW has to keep an open mind. Creativity is involved in making sense of disparate and fragmentary evidence. Creativity is manifested in: thinking 'outside the box'; thinking laterally and speculatively as a way of moving beyond the more obvious; keeping an open mind and not closing off possible courses of action; inventing hypotheses to guide decision making.

*I think it could be argued it is a vital component of a good social worker. If creativity is looking outside the box, seeing things from a different perspective or experiencing oneself differently, then effectively doing and promoting these things in others are essential for good practice.*

*Thom Garfat, amongst others, has written about meaning making—the processes by which individuals construct meaning, and how we co-construct meaning with them—and how attending to these processes is a vital component of effective intervention. I think by attending to these processes, we are better equipped to see through the eyes of our clients.*

This insight reveals the importance of the Social Worker trying to see the world in the way the people they are trying to help see it.

Resolving or mediating a problem will depend to a large extent on the social worker's ability to harness resources (financial, material, professional expertise). Resourcefulness in acquiring scarce

resources which help people and improve their conditions and circumstances is another important focus for creativity and is the central concern of the second stage of social work problem working.

*At the most mundane level such things as getting money for a homeless family out of the benefits office at 4.15 p.m. on a Friday afternoon counts as pretty creative in my book! At a broader level, social workers work with few resources, often in hostile situations, with few hard and fast boundaries (except the law, social policy and procedures). All of this calls for creativity of a kind.*

Developing and maintaining good working relationships with people in other organizations is crucial as is the ability to communicate, persuade, negotiate and make complex and timely connections so that resources are brought to bear on the particular issue. The Social Worker must create partnerships with resource providers and act as a broker to make things happen (brokerage: an intentional act in which the broker seeks to work in collaborative and creative ways with people, ideas, knowledge and resources to solve a complex problem or change something – adapted from Jackson 2003).

*Social Workers often have to build bridges between organisations (such as Health, or Education, or Housing) who are more routinely set in narrow service frameworks, with set roles and responsibilities. Beyond the performance of prescribed tasks, the relationship between service user and practitioner is a creative dynamic, and should be cherished as such.*

*Social workers need to be creative to explore ways of working that don't necessarily use limited resources but can foster more meaningful and tangible solutions to the issues they face with their service users. This involves risk taking.*

*Creating new services/projects/groups within a constrained job description – the project takes creativity and making the case for doing it sometimes takes creativity as well as research and reasoned argument.*

*They also have to find new ways of working both with service users and other professionals in a more general way. A lot of creativity takes place in finding resources and solutions to individual situations.*

*They may use their own talents to work directly with service users, use other organisations/people to enable and empower, provide or link service users to resources which may change their lives.*

*They come into situations that have already proved 'difficult to manage' for a range of individuals, families, professional groupings and then work to provide (in partnership with all interested others) solutions that work out in practice in people's lives. They are therefore creative on a day by day basis on a whole range of small and large activities in the sense of 'making something happen'.*

*"Old-fashioned" values of "make do and mend", "make something out of very little" are incredibly important forms of creativity in social work on a day to day basis – even when well resourced, we will always find there is something that isn't quite right or is too expensive. Being creative with a variety of resources/people, who may not be used to working together – both in individual cases and also when you can see that there are common needs between organisations or common needs and it would be win-win, and cost effective for something to be done together e.g. from practice – getting child care and adult care to collaborate on running a nursery in a residential establishment for older people from education and practice – everyone needs service user involvement, so LAs, voluntaries and HEIs can collaborate on training, supporting, researching how this is best managed. Or getting students on architecture/interior design course to work with student SWs in making positive changes to environments for particular groups – video production*



students to provide expertise to SW students and Service Users making a video together.

*Lack of traditional services and/or a willingness to utilise other resources can drive creativity on the part of social workers, as long as they detach the 'needs' or aspirations of their clients from the services that would normally be provided. I once compared the cost of a respite stay at a 'Residential Home' with a holiday abroad with the Winged Fellowship Trust (Euro Disney, in fact) and there was little to choose between the two in terms of cost. The Resource Panel accepted my argument that the Winged Fellowship Holiday would offer at least as much in terms of 'meeting needs' although if they had been sticklers for regulation in terms of Health & Safety the decision may not have been favourable. In one team we were quite keen on using those doing community service to decorate for disabled and older people. Creativity also comes in the form of risk-taking and supporting risk-taking – Mr Blair recently spoke about the need to move away from the increasingly risk-averse culture we seem to be developing and on this I agree with him.*

Social Workers work with people who are having to cope with complex and unfamiliar administrative and bureaucratic systems. A good deal of creative energy is expended in helping people overcome the perceived or real barriers created by the administrative and regulatory world.

*I think a major space for creativity is where social workers interpret policy and procedure in a reflective and thoughtful way rather than technical way. Social workers can be creative in using their discretion and autonomy to act as a buffer against harsher objective forces like legislation and procedure and ensure that service users receive the best service possible within a context where there are often many constraints.*

*Being a bit creative with the truth, but more creative in expression/writing in order to make the service user appear to fit a criteria more exactly than they do (I know it's a bit dodgy ethically, but I am sure you know what I mean when I say this is sometimes the right thing to do) – being able, in the very few words available on forms/referral letters and without being subjective or judgmental, to be able to bring the service user alive in the mind of the reader or the next social worker. i.e. to use creativity in writing to enhance person-centred practice by others.*

Competency clearly underlies the professional actions of the social worker but in some responses there is sense of using competency creatively.

*There are a range of identifiable skills that are used creatively as well as competently, for example a few are:*

- *engaging with people in relationships: often with a whole range of people in society including many people whose behaviours can be complex to understand or whose communication modes are different from your own or where assistance is needed.*
- *developing the capacity to understand the world view of the other across class, culture, religious perspective*
- *being able to network effectively in a range of professional groupings and communities*
- *the ability to make with others complex decisions about someone else's life course /situation*
- *abilities in forming and co-ordination and facilitating meetings, groups etc.*

*All these are areas where a certain level of basic and advanced competence can be taught: but because every person's situation is unique the challenge is to make creative use of your learned skills and own ability, and the abilities of others to come to innovative solutions that are good enough, the least damaging or destructive and preferably life enhancing in a particular situation. The applications vary according to setting but examples are: the best residential placement for an older person/support package at home; life story work with children looked after; maintaining children at home with parents in the community carefully and creatively when the risk of harm is to be assessed and monitored etc. There's some creative work around this at the moment in the*

*solution focused approach.*

## **Sources of Stimulation**

From the views expressed above and throughout this document the primary sources of stimulation for creative thinking and action are the real world problems and challenges that social workers encounter every day of their lives. Examples of sources of inspiration/motivation:

### *Stimulation from people and their individual problems*

- the infinite variety of human beings
- working with people to help resolve their problems
- seeking to engage and communicate with vulnerable people in a meaningful way
- the need to make practical applications to life situations for each unique individual in their own unique context
- close encounters with poverty and emotional deprivation
- responding to constantly changing dynamics
- bringing more order to the chaos of some people's lives
- helping students to become more self-aware

### *stimulation from the subject*

- encounters with other social workers especially from other countries
- the discursive nature of the subject
- social sciences encourage/require creative thought

### *stimulations from the system*

- engaging with the apparatus of the state to develop case law and argue for change
- working out how to deliver/support new imperatives of the state
- responding to continuous change in social policy and legislation
- working within rigid systems (legal, NHS etc) on behalf of the individual, lead social workers need to be creative in getting around bureaucracy and seeking individualistic solutions
- counteracting or actually making technocratic and managerialist approaches work

*It is the potential for infinite variety in working with human beings that can stimulate creativity. This can be sharpened by close encounters with poverty, and with emotional deprivation and abuse.*

*I believe most of the social sciences encourage/require creative thought – or at least imaginative thought; the ability to literally think outside the box (it used to be more like blue skies) in both understanding and responding to constantly changing dynamics in whatever contexts people work.*

*The subjects encourage students to think in new ways about 'old' problems and to reframe problems in different ways. There is never one service user, family, or group exactly the same as another and therefore different ways of working and communicating are always needed. Learning about yourself and how and why you behave promotes understanding of others and what's more fascinating than yourself? Human behaviour is complex and varied – some are stimulated by a need to make a difference; a spiritual sense of the world ; others just want to see more order in the chaos of people's lives and their own.*

*I think social work is a subject that one cannot just objectively learn – one has to engage subjectively with the subject matter in terms of the knowledge, values and skills required. For*

*example, you have to be creative to help students to learn values – just telling them about them will never work so that requires us as educators to think creatively about how you help students to learn about self-awareness, reflective practice; their own attitudes and prejudices etc.*

*The other motivation for creativity in social work is the current climate which can be so technocratic and managerialist that absence of a creative approach to learning is likely to result in social work education being dull and driven only by concern with benchmark statements and key roles.*

*My most recent experience of students and teachers being stimulated to think about their practice, has been the involvement of young service users on the social work programme. Their questions, feedback, experiences and suggestions have made us all think very carefully about our practice. The students also helped the service users to make a video for inclusion on the course and for some, it was the first time they had worked alongside service users as colleagues. All sorts of ideas about practice came out in the discussion of the role plays.*

*Creativity can be stimulated by encounters with social workers and social work academics from other countries (e.g. I know social work academics from Bombay/Mumbai who simply closed down their academy for four weeks and took their students off to work with gassed families in Bhopal).*

*What stimulates me (and I hope students) – although I think that the recent history of social work and social work education has encouraged an emphasis on instrumentality rather than creativity which equation needs a bit of rebalancing – is the discursive nature of the subject and the need to make practical applications to life situations for each unique individual in their own unique context.*

*Also as society itself changes and legislation responds there is a sense in which social workers are at the cutting edge of this interaction between the individual and the apparatus of the state- which again requires creativity as the case law can follow practice and this requires some effort by social workers, managers and academics to identify changes and argue for them.*

*Sensible imperatives from government/GSCC etc can give impetus for creativity e.g. having to include service users, ECDL, multi-professional practice, evidence based practice – having it in black and white that you have to do it as well as the fact you want to, because it is good practice, focuses organisations to be creative.*

*Maybe subject-wise, the fact that social policy and legislation change so frequently and the make up of society changes, makes you constantly re-evaluate and from that, creativity is likely to spring. Even some of the "change for change sake" things actually stimulate new thinking.*

*Direct work with vulnerable people and the effort of seeking to engage and communicate with them in a meaningful way.*

*The need to apply theory to practice requires creative thinking. Skills, methods and models teaching emphasise this. Ethics sequences are often dilemma based and require a problem-solving and therefore creative approach. It may also be that working within rigid systems (legal, NHS etc.) on behalf of the individual lead social workers to be creative in getting around bureaucracy and seeking individualistic solutions.*

### ***A skeptical view!***

*I find this hard. Has an assumption that there is something intrinsically present in social work that produces, potentially at least, something called creativity. We'd probably gets lots of answers about being reflective, facilitating, empowering and the like which may not take us very far.*

## **Forms of teaching and contexts/conditions that encourage/enable students to be creative**

Social work teachers identify a huge range of teaching and learning methods through which students' creativity can be promoted. The methods tend to be those that result in active engaged learning – students doing things to learn often collaboratively. They are methods that encourage open-ended exploration through problem working and story telling. They sometimes/often combine techniques, for example creative thinking/problem working with problem based learning or scenarios. They require forms of teaching that are facilitative rather than based on transmission.

*teachers of social work must adopt facilitative styles of working, they must model a creative approach for the students to develop more personal creative styles of learning and they must be prepared to take risks themselves with new teaching/learning resources, new methods of assessment and evaluation.*

### **Problem working**

- EAL/Problem based learning – students learning to problem-solve throughout.
- Learning approaches such as PBL, EBL, community profiling, group work, use of arts (music, drama, literature) all have the potential for creativity.
- EAL sequence involving service user visits brought surprises and thoughtfulness in big doses to students.
- Chaotic environments exercises.
- Group/problem working based experience is vital for this process. Teachers have a vital role in the facilitation process and the provision of resources to allow the students to think broadly in an informed way.

### **Case studies and scenarios**

- Challenging scenarios/creative thinking/problem working techniques.
- The opportunity to work on case studies and to exercise judgement and then compare and contrast with others.
- Practice on real scenarios, case studies, inquiry reports etc.
- Presentations, poster presentations (both in groups), live role play, VIG, Chaotic environments exercises, self awareness and many other kinds of exercises in skills teaching, portfolio and electronic portfolio work – all these methods encourage creativity in the responses of students.
- Case discussions at college, during placement, can allow students to help each other think creatively. They share methods and interventions, plus articles, videos and other resources which can assist in their work with service users.
- Discussion in small groups, case studies.
- Challenging "Make do and mend" scenarios where students have to help a group/service user meet a need, then say you are taking away a particular service and they've got to do it without that, take away another one and so on.
- A virtual client with a rather wild task to perform, like bungy jumping and then take away the unfortunate person's limbs/senses/faculties one by one – could introduce competition, another spur to creativity at this point, by having teams and the first team who can't find a way to help their service user bungy jump, loses.

### **Story telling/drama/role play/self-observation**

- Group story telling, experiential exercises, including role play, more use of drama techniques in college. Case discussions, team meetings and good supervision in placement.
- Use of video/drama.
- Use of video for self observation; use of tasks completed and presented to others in group.
- Helping students to see the 'whole picture' and the 'whole person' i.e. the service user as actor in their own lives and the contributions of a whole range of people when interventions are needed and planned.

### **Group work**

- Through focused small group work that uses a variety of methods (e.g. buzz groups, fish bowl exercises, quizzes, set case study tasks, policy development exercises etc.) and where learning from these exercises is facilitated through good feedback, encouraging students to write up their discussions and share them, etc.

### **Relating to professional practice/work environments**

- Practice Learning enables students to work on 'live' cases and provides the opportunity for creative (or risk taking) teachers to offer flexible learning that responds to such scenarios, rather than slavishly following set curricula.
- The Practice Learning Log, worked on throughout the programme, provides a stable stem on which to develop and engender creative learning.

### **Learning rich in experience**

Study visits – abroad for preference – taking people out of known environments is bound to stimulate creativity, because you get a wider variety of opinions, see different ways of looking at things and have to be creative in achieving what you have to do in a new environment e.g. overcoming communication barriers, finding your way around etc.

### **Specific creative approaches**

- Creative writing.
- Use of creative arts.
- Sculpturing.
- Creative thinking techniques like brainstorming, and problem solving techniques.

### **Strategies that can no longer be used**

- The residential weeks on the old CSS course were wonderful, now lost, opportunities for students to develop creativity and share it.
- We used to have creative days! On such days students would share creative parts of their lives in and out of work.
- We train more social workers, but we do not use poetry, Mozart and modern novels in the ways that we once did.

### **Conditions that support students' creativity**

- Confidence and a positive drive from staff about the value and practical usefulness of what is delivered and the ability to accept and respond honestly to students queries and reservations.
- Willingness to move with live and new issues as they come up (and they will).
- The attitudes and values of teachers and the extent to which their practice is reflective and in partnership (as above).
- Teachers need to model creative attitudes and practices when they work with their teaching-related problems and show students this.
- Trusting relationships: an atmosphere of trust and a contained environment - also a pleasing environment are important: willingness to expose own feelings and beliefs.
- A climate of openness and discussion about knowledge for applied social work, especially around values and especially the relationships between the personal and professional.
- Perhaps a grounding in ones own experience helps people to stretch enough to engage in material creatively. I also think people need to feel emotionally safe and that their views or contributions are valued before many of them will venture into creative territories.
- Practices that enable students to understand clearly their role and remit in society and to understand and live with the risks.
- Praising success rather than criticising failure is the key to unlocking creativity.
- Supportive and engaging environment. To achieve space for creativity, use of effective on-line

resources is crucially important and helpful – by using on-line resources, you can provide students with a range of materials to read before class, you can give basic information leaving room for discussion in class etc. Online communication through discussion forums is another example of potential for creative learning alongside face-to-face encounters. Self-directed (but properly supported) student learning is also highly effective, I find.

- Well-resourced small group teaching pursuing imaginative learning outcomes helps.
- Students have to be helped to buy into the notion of an organic learning environment, where everything is not screwed down and predictable.
- University classrooms do not generally foster a creative spirit i.e. rows of desks, awful chairs, the whiteboard in dominance, etc., etc ...I take students away from the university setting if possible – to art centres, to creative departments in hospitals to the sculpture and art departments
- Giving students the time to learn basic skills well: interviewing; report writing; administration; court presentation etc.
- Creating opportunities to simulate practice; use of video for self observation; use of tasks completed and presented to others in group.
- Giving time to personal dilemmas, especially ethical ones.
- Providing the means to understand research process and the use of research outcomes relevantly and the nature of evidence.
- Time on discussing the nature of informed judgements and decision making and accountability. Practice on real scenarios, case studies, inquiry reports etc.
- Helping students to appreciate the boundaries and constraints within which they will work then showing them that they can still be creative and work across or shift the boundaries a bit.
- Humour definitely stimulates creativity – comedians are incredibly creative in the way they juxtapose things or look at things from a different angle, so listening to comedians must be good.

### **Curriculum design**

- Power sharing at a Programme Management level enables students to shape the curriculum, as does the involvement of all stakeholders (service users, carers, support workers, employers etc.): involvement of users and carers in curriculum planning, delivery and assessment.
- Ensuring the curriculum is relevant and responsive to current concerns and anxieties so that students are motivated to engage creatively (sounds obvious but is the critical base line).

### **Participants' Responses**

*Trust is most important, if we view creativity as requiring vulnerability "it has something to do with the exposure to others of one's inner world".*

*I think it is helpful if social work students are helped first to understand clearly their role and remit in society, where the areas of debate are currently, and their key position as brokers, negotiators, facilitators, resource handlers, and yes agents of the state and the creative tensions inherent in the role. It is also helpful to provide the knowledge base as it stands (not to say it can't be developed /challenged) but this is where we as a profession have been, are and are moving from. To make sure that students know that these are the disciplines/research bases we draw from and are working to understand and develop. An international perspective on social policy is especially helpful as there are similar debates on certain issues around the world and much room for creativity through exchange of experience and practice. The use of the International definition (at last) in the new degree is really helpful, along with the emphases on service user voice and developmental understandings of people. Social work has now a sufficiently developed body of applied research for practice to start from and knowing this gives students confidence about their starting points.*

*To then create a climate for open-ness and discussion about knowledge for applied social work, especially around values and especially the relationships between the personal and professional and to have critical discussion in groups and assignments. To also help students to understand and live with the risks (violence/getting it 'wrong' ) and the impact of the job on yourself as a person and where*

support can be found. This had got lost until recently and to be creative and make useful judgements (informed + professional) a sense of personal position is needed to be able to see your own impact on situations and others and assess its effect. There is a need to create a demand from students into agencies for better creative management and more time given to professional reflective supervision to avoid the current levels of stress and burnout which are counter creative. Also to teach that intervention isn't only or always about resources or more resource but also creative use of self, service user community and other agency resources through proactive work can create useful change.

Generally, praising success rather than criticising failure is the key to unlocking creativity – Sven-Goran Erickson understands this well; his model of coaching is effective and powerful. However, students have to jump through so many hoops and meet so many detailed criteria (competences/key-roles) to pass the overly-regulated SW course that we inevitably tend to focus on their weaknesses rather than their strengths. We are criticised by some of our students for being too critical on mark sheets etc and this is probably fair comment. Not many of us thrive on criticism though we all respond positively to praise – I think we as SW trainers often forget this even though we espouse these very principles through the teaching of such approaches as 'solution-focused' etc.

I think that the group/problem based experience is vital for this process. Teachers have a vital role in the facilitation process and the provision of resources to allow the students to think broadly in an informed way. In addition, case discussions at college, during placement, can allow students to help each other think creatively. They share methods and interventions, plus articles, videos and other resources which can assist in their work with service users.

Finding new ways of teaching, given that didactic teaching does not work well as a lone method, is important. EAL/Problem based learning is excellent in this way – students are learning to problem-solve throughout. Our EAL sequence that involved service user visits brought surprises and thoughtfulness in big doses to students. Their presentations mirrored creativity in carrying out the work – presentations, poster presentations (both in groups), live role play, VIG, Chaotic environments exercises, self awareness and many other kinds of exercises in skills teaching, portfolio and electronic portfolio work – all these methods encourage creativity in the responses of students.

Learning approaches such as PBL, EBL, community profiling, group work, use of arts (music, drama, literature) all have the potential for creativity. Unfortunately, the increasing bureaucratisation of the curriculum tends to work against creativity on the part of both educators and students.

Discussion in small groups, case studies, group story telling, experiential exercises, including role play, more use of drama techniques in college. Case discussions, team meetings and good supervision in placement.

This answer could be very detailed but in general, I think the way educators do this is through focused small group work which uses a variety of methods (e.g. buzz groups, fish bowl exercises, quizzes, set case study tasks, policy development exercises etc.) and where learning from these exercises is facilitated through good feedback, encouraging students to write up their discussions and share them, etc.

To achieve space for creativity, use of effective on-line resources is crucially important and helpful – by using on-line resources, you can provide students with a range of materials to read before class, you can give basic information leaving room for discussion in class etc. Online communication through discussion forums is another example of potential for creative learning alongside face-to-face encounters. Self-directed (but properly supported) student learning is also highly effective I find.

Video, drama, sculpting, poster presentation, group work presentations are all used in my department. The residential weeks on the old CSS course were wonderful, now lost, opportunities for students to develop creativity and share it. We actually used to have creative days! On such days students would share creative parts of their lives in and out of work. I have made videos, compiled posters of my life,

*made and tasted wine, learnt about the role of beauty therapy in a hospice, taken part in poetry, dance and yoga sessions-all led by students. Many people picked up ideas for working with clients but this was not the main aim.*

*Well-resourced small group teaching pursuing imaginative learning outcomes helps. Sticking large groups in lecture theatres and talking at them does not help, very much. We were far more creative when we ran on staff:student ratios of 1:10, than we are with our present 1:25. We train more social workers, but we do not use poetry, Mozart and modern novels in the ways that we once did.*

*Power sharing at a Programme Management level enables students to shape the curriculum, as does the involvement of all stakeholders (service users, carers, support workers, employers etc). Students have to be helped to buy into the notion of an organic learning environment, where everything is not screwed down and predictable. The Practice Learning Log, worked on throughout the programme, provides a stable stem on which to develop and engender creative learning.*

*The areas of the curriculum where creativity is most likely to occur are:*

- fostering links between practice learning and university learning, through different types of placement format and assessment*
- the area of skills development (as with the communication skills section shown above, but also observation skills, and intervention skills such as family work, group-work etc)*
- the involvement of users and carers in curriculum planning, delivery and assessment*
- the dimension of interprofessional learning, where learning is developed for SW students alongside those from other professions e.g. medical students, nurses, OTs, teachers, lawyers, police etc.*

*I don't know how much we explicitly think about this. I remember on a couple of occasions setting a wee assignment that required students to think creatively about a subject and create a hypothetical plan of action (as to how they would concretely communicate a 'safe base' in a residential unit). It was disappointing how few students actually submitted the piece of work. I think it's too easy to get into the rut of only focusing on the essay at the end of the module. The wee 'assignment' didn't go towards their final mark, so many couldn't be bothered.*

*On a postgraduate module, students were asked to draw from their own experience to answer a worksheet, and from that we went on to create something outside the standard portfolios. People seemed enthused by the process. Perhaps a grounding in ones own experience helps people to stretch enough to engage in material creatively. I also think people need to feel emotionally safe and that their views or contributions are valued before many of them will venture into creative territories.*

*I also recently received an excellent portfolio submission in which a student creatively and innovatively addressed the learning outcomes (again on a postgraduate course). He had approached me ahead of time to bounce some ideas around and to check if it'd be okay, and it was a delight in terms of marking. Again, I think because he grounded the assignment in his own experience, and probably because he felt solid in his own previous professional training/experience, he was able to venture beyond the normal approach to the assignment.*

*An atmosphere of trust and a contained environment – also a pleasing environment are important if social work educators are going to encourage students to be creative. The teachers of social work must adopt facilitative styles of working, they must model a creative approach for the students to develop more personal creative styles of learning and they must be prepared to take risks themselves with new teaching/learning resources, new methods of assessment and evaluation. I take students away from the university setting if possible – to art centres, to creative departments in hospitals to the sculpture and art departments. The feedback from students is extremely positive. University classrooms do not generally foster a creative spirit i.e. rows of desks, awful chairs, the whiteboard in dominance, etc., etc...*

*Sociology show includes demonstrating that not all societies do it our way and there are alternatives.*



*Using video to teach skills particularly communication & observation is particularly helpful.*

*Practice Learning enables students to work on 'live' cases and provides the opportunity for creative (or risk taking) teachers to offer flexible learning that responds to such scenarios, rather than slavishly following set curricula.*

*I think our new PBL model offers possibilities for the students to approach their work more creatively. Working on a new module brings with it creative possibilities, as does 'clicking' with a colleague in planning/delivering content in a different way. I found that practice based subjects were more likely to stimulate my own creativity in terms of how I sought to deliver material and facilitate learning.*

*I use activities such as getting small groups to express the key points of (often fairly dry) articles or reports in the form of poetry – generally, they are aghast at first when asked to do this but invariably end up enjoying the experience.*

*What forms of teaching encourage/enable students to be creative?*

- *The opportunity to work on case studies and to exercise judgement and then compare and contrast with others.*
- *Exchange of ideas across 'specialisms' encouraging the relinquishment of 'silo' mentalities.*
- *Helping students to see the 'whole picture' and the 'whole person' i.e. the service user as actor in their own lives and the contributions of a whole range of people when interventions are needed and planned.*
- *Giving confidence about legal, policy and other directives so that students know what they can't change and what they can.*
- *Giving time to learn basic skills well : interviewing; report writing; administration; court presentation etc.*
- *Creating opportunities to simulate practice; use of video for self observation; use of tasks completed and presented to others in group.*
- *Giving time to personal dilemmas, especially ethical ones.*
- *Providing the means to understand research process and the use of research outcomes relevantly and the nature of evidence.*
- *Time on discussing the nature of informed judgements and decision making and accountability. Practice on real scenarios, case studies, inquiry reports etc.*
- *Close relationships between employers, policy makers, universities and practice assessors and shared vision.*

*What contexts/conditions for learning encourage/enable students to be creative?*

- *Group exercises, the creation of trust and mutuality in small groups.*
- *Confidence and a positive drive from staff about the value and practical usefulness of what is delivered and the ability to accept and respond honestly to students' queries and reservations.*
- *Willingness to move with live and new issues as they come up (and they will).*
- *Really this for me is about the attitudes and values of teachers and the extent to which their practice is reflective and in partnership (as above).*
- *Ensuring the curriculum is relevant and responsive to current concerns and anxieties so that students are motivated to engage creatively (sounds obvious but is the critical base line)*

*Accepting the reality of the context of SW, but then helping them to be creative within that and then to help shift the boundaries a bit. It is no use coming up with strategies that have no hold on reality. They are going to have to fill in forms and work within resource limits, but you can help them do it creatively, whereas if you just bemoan the fact they have to fill in forms alongside them and talk about what they could do if the framework were different, it won't work.*

*Whenever you are creative in teaching, showing how this could be used in a different context in*

*practice. e.g. if you produce an interest online quiz, interactive exercise, discuss using a similar technique with a teenager who finds it hard to discuss things with you face-to-face in practice.*

*Making sure the teaching makes them "feel" as well as think in order to increase their passion and motivation to be creative. If a role play is long enough and real enough to help them feel what it's like to be unable to speak in a crowded day centre or a service user is able to convey how it feels for them powerfully, then they are more likely to want to be creative to meet the need or change an injustice.*

*Teaching problem-solving models and techniques which include a "blue sky thinking" element and a circular, rather than linear pattern. Using the method in any joint work with students, whether in tutorial or at course level - e.g. there's a problem about the timing of a class – identify problem, explore wild solutions as well as standard ones etc., make reference to using a problem-solving model, carry out the agreed plan jointly, to model and to share.*

*Have a part of exploring any topic which involves being non-judgmental about all suggestions. Save analysis and evaluation till "brainstorm" or "board blast" or whatever it's called is done. Do this stage with humour. Humour definitely stimulates creativity – comedians are incredibly creative in the way they juxtapose things or look at things from a different angle, so listening to comedians must be good. (Anyway it's fun.)*

*Specific exercises to promote creativity – specially for the "make do and mend" type. e.g. give a scenario where they have to help a group/service user meet a need, then say you are taking away a particular service and they've got to do it without that, take away another one and so on. Or give them a virtual client with a rather wild task to perform, like bungy jumping and then take away the unfortunate person's limbs/senses/faculties one by one – could introduce competition, another spur to creativity at this point, by having teams and the first team who can't find a way to help their service user bungy jump, loses.*

*Study visits – abroad for preference – taking people out of known environments is bound to stimulate creativity, because you get a wider variety of opinions, see different ways of looking at things and have to be creative in achieving what you have to do in a new environment e.g. overcoming communication barriers, finding your way around etc.*

*Creative writing. Use of creative arts.*

*Social work teachers can help students to be creative in their practice by using practice example from their own casework experience or by using good practice examples from other social workers. Using role play and group exercises plus case studies can help students to be creative. Students can be enabled to be creative through the development of trusting relationships within the group, constructive feedback and clear instructions and a shared understanding of the learning objectives.*

## **Evaluation of Students' Creativity**

Social work teachers and practitioners hold a variety of views that might be characterized as:

- 1 A strong belief that creativity is not generally assessed or if it is it is implicit in criteria that are not explicit in their elaboration of creativity. This view shades into the view that creativity must be integral to other things which are assessed like criticality.
- 2 A default view – we assess conformity. When we see originality we recognise and give credit for it.
- 3 A third position – although we do not assess creativity directly we assess how competent a student is in expressing innovative thinking in written work and how they demonstrate this competence in practice.

- 4 A fourth position – although not specifically assessed in a formative way the design of assessment (e.g. role plays) itself should ensure that students have to be creative: it's captured anyway even though the nature of the creativity being captured may not be explicit.

Interestingly, no responses suggested that there is a relationship between levels of academic achievement and creativity, i.e. higher levels of achievement are generally associated with evidence of creativity.

## Participants' responses

*I don't think we do explicitly although there must be a lot in things like critical evaluation as people move towards level 6. From a practice teaching perspective also a lot implicit with placements. There are elements of creativity with poster presentations etc.*

*Generally it is not assessed formally. I suppose it is looked at within the range of options a student considers when posed with a problem. Within assessment this is demonstrated within case studies which are formally assessed but creativity is not one of the criteria.*

*I don't think we do – at least not explicitly. If someone is innovative in how they approach an assignment or how they connect theories or apply them then as long as they're accurate, or have met the learning outcomes, I'd suspect they'll get positive feedback on their assignment. Beyond that, I don't think we do much at all.*

*We don't – we evaluate conformity and see originality as a bonus. In our defence, students do have to get some basics right and many of them struggle to do so. You cannot run before you can walk and (to stretch the analogy) most students leave college with crutches, not running shoes. For us, it is often refreshing to read an assignment that isn't riddled with plagiarised material, never mind one that actually demonstrates genuine creativity. There I go again, being critical...*

*Very, very difficult this one. The short answer is, I'm not sure that creativity is assessed or rewarded. I guess it might be rewarded by practice teachers with attention, though one person's creativity might be another's cussid 'otherness'! It's a bit self-centred, but a student's creativity is, for me, when I go "I'd not thought of that", the light bulb moment (this for written stuff). For live stuff, it's when I think, that was really clever, to think of doing that/saying that. It's often about making connections that haven't been made. It seems especially creative if I haven't already made them!*

*Formally, we don't try to assess it. But we do ask students to keep reflective journals and, in some of their essays, reflect upon the ways in which a particular case affected them personally.*

*We do not assess creativity directly but assess how competent a student is in expressing innovative thinking in written work and how they demonstrate this competence in practice.*

*It probably is not specifically assessed in a formative way but the design of assessment itself should ensure possibilities for creativity – i.e. for each student to have a mix of assessment that allows them to maximise their creativity – e.g. role plays, presentations that encourage students to experiment and have some control over content and design, interesting written assignments that get the students to think.*

*I find that students have to do twice as much if they use a creative method and they then have to supply essentially an essay to explain the underpinning theory. An example is a seminar group of mine, who faced with the task of compiling a group presentation on a social work method decided to film themselves learning to work as a group. This was funny, insightful and clearly included group theory. They gained a mark of 80 – the highest ever. Two members of the group then failed the*

*second part of the assignment – a theoretical essay and therefore the assessment. Madness. This is not required in music or the fine arts!*

*Some time ago a student wrote a brilliant dissertation on social work with older people, largely based on King Lear; he got a distinction. This kind of thing is now rare, although we do get the odd literary quote. Creativity does not figure very highly on our marking criteria – however, originality does and gets high marks.*

*Essentially a contradiction. The more something is evaluated (or assessed), the more the Quality Assurance juggernaut requires specified learning outcomes, defined curriculum input, performance/assessment criteria and QA systems... in other words, the very processes that determine instrumental and functional learning... the antithesis of creative learning.*

*Set tasks which involve being creative in the first place, so achieving it automatically means they have been creative. e.g. mini projects.*

*Difficult to measure creativity as it can be evoked by one situation and stifled in another. The real creative person can use him/herself to facilitate others in the most difficult situations. Sometimes this might result in things just not getting worse for a service user, rather than massive change. On one level it can be recognised in the way a student takes on board and considers new ideas and does not dismiss them or accept them without reflection. Creativity has to be judged to a certain extent within reflection and written assignments. I have read new ideas, new approaches or adaptations of frameworks and models, theories etc, in students' written work and have awarded them with a mark 70+ for example.*

*Look for evidence of 'out of the box' thinking and actions, supported by evidence for it. And take a look at how, for example, performing arts educators assess students' performances!*

*Criteria: I would have to send an assessment guide in to really answer this to my own satisfaction – but off the top of my head – it's about the student's ability in an essay to handle competing ideas/knowledge bases and come up with their own formulations and re-formulations and to use that knowledge relevantly in applied practice. I think I am arguing that creativity is not always about making anything radically new but it is about how you are capable of using what you have to 'make something' newly relevant to social work practice in a particular situation or perhaps in a new way. So as an assessor I would be looking for the ability to articulate ideas, argue for and against using competing ideas and frameworks and student capacity for making analyses and judgements based on the evidence available and also for imaginative or original applications to practice that benefit service users.*

## **Factors that inhibit students' creativity in social work education**

Factors can be categorized into:

### *Cultural factors*

The loss of the original values mentioned at start of "make do and mend" etc. in society in general.

### *Teacher/teaching related factors*

- Lack of time.
- Any teaching/assessment methods that require the production of facts, written work in a formulaic way.
- Teaching that is didactic.
- Fear stops many social workers (or their managers) from trying out new ways of working.
- Fear, complacency, a lack of encouragement or explicit valuing of creativity.
- Fear of failure and of 'getting it wrong'. Unfortunately public perceptions of social work have had

a desire for safety and accountability which can lead to conservative and safe thinking.

- The mechanistic way learning outcomes can sometimes be presented and a tendency to focus just on basic standards (e.g. have the six key roles been met) rather than seeing these as basic pass standards that all education providers should strive to deliver way above and beyond.

### **Assessment**

- If guidelines on assessed tasks put no premium on creativity, students will not be encouraged towards this.
- The rigidity of the assessment framework – the key roles are pretty comprehensive and it is all too easy to take a tick-box approach to getting through the course.

### *Student related factors*

- Students (mis?) perceptions of what social work could be.
- Student debt.
- Their personal baggage.
- Anxiety around passing assignments, practice learning.
- Lack of time.

### *Institutional or systemic factors*

- Lack of time.
- High workload.
- Lack of admin support.
- An obsession with the outcomes of learning (competencies, etc.) can inhibit students from taking risks.
- Increasing standardisation and bureaucratisation of the curriculum and the managerialism and proceduralism of social work practice.
- Conservative validation panels.
- The limitations of a university and its staff.
- The increasing requirements for learning facts.
- Such concepts as: Occupational Standards, Performance Indicators, Competences, Quality Assurance systems (QAA, TQI) and regulatory frameworks (such as via GSCC).
- Sometimes pace of change, or irrelevant nature of change in social policy/legislation fills the curriculum and students' minds with so many new facts to absorb, it is hard to make space to use the new situation creatively.
- Lack of time and resources to work with practice learning settings, employers etc.
- Problems with the language used in care management. "Purchasing" implies buying something which someone else offers, off the shelf, not having a dialogue with the provider as to what you actually want.
- Not having dedicated teaching space. Few rooms "owned" by a department cuts down on use of props, visual stimuli on the walls.

### **Participants' responses**

*I would say that time constraints are one of the main factors within the college setting. On placement, time is also a constraint as well as the limitations of the agency. For example, students have wanted to undertake direct work with children but have been told that the agencies no longer do this due to heavy workloads. Many students do try to incorporate this into their placements but use their own resources rather than those of the agency.*

*Creativity on the part of social work lecturers is stifled by the workload and the lack of admin support (I cannot speak for Universities where it is no doubt quite different). I have a dozen or more wonderful ideas for developing materials, assessment methods etc. that will never be realised because I spend*

*much of 50+ hour week marking, totaling registers, recording grades, writing references, interviewing candidates, testing candidates for literacy and numeracy etc. etc .etc...*

*Creativity could be stifled by anxiety and concerns about risk.*

*I'm sure I won't be the only one to mention this, but I do think that an obsession with the outcomes of learning (competencies, etc.) can inhibit students from taking risks (which tends to inhibit creativity). Cliché but probably the limits of their imagination. There's an interesting example in the PL audit research report we did (Taskforce website) of six students who had a placement in a non-social work setting. Five had a fantastic time and learned loads, worked and learned creatively, the sixth couldn't see where the social work was!! I think practice teachers have a big role to play, both to model creativity and to give students enough space to be creative.*

*The increasing standardisation and bureaucratisation of the curriculum and the managerialism and proceduralism of social work practice. Forgive this outburst of nostalgia, but I recall a time when Social Work was mostly about being creative – sadly no longer the case.*

*A desire for safety and accountability which can lead to conservative and safe thinking. The dominance of an evidence-based paradigm.*

*Any teaching/assessment methods that require the production of facts, written work in a formulaic way. Standard questions on human growth and development, law teaching that is didactic. The student must feel involved with the subject matter. Having to work to deadlines and a good-enough profile, whether on placement or on taught parts of a course will drain creativity. I think if guidelines on assessed tasks put no premium on creativity, students will not be encouraged towards this.*

*The mechanistic way learning outcomes can sometimes be presented and a tendency to focus just on basic standards (e.g. have the six key roles been met) rather than seeing these as basic pass standards that all education providers should strive to deliver way above and beyond.*

*The rigidity of the assessment framework – the key roles are pretty comprehensive and it is all too easy to take a tick-box approach to getting through the course – there is so much they HAVE to do that they end up saying, effectively, what MUST I do to get through? rather than what kind of fun can I have with this assignment/presentation etc.*

*In designing the new curriculum, we are trying to create space for creativity by giving a mix of assessment, different types of teaching in different sizes of class, effective use of intra-net sites for all modules delivered and involvement of students in peer learning and peer assessment.*

*Conservative validation panels.*

*The limitations of a university and its staff. The increasing requirements for learning facts. Students (mis?) perceptions of what social work could be.*

*Close encounters with what they characterise as the grim reality of our social services.*

*Obviously, such concepts as: Occupational Standards, Performance Indicators, Competences, Quality Assurance systems (QAA, TQI) and regulatory frameworks (such as via GSCC). If we can allow creativity to flourish in some small measure around the necessarily rigid core, then we will have done well.*

*Fear, complacency, a lack of encouragement or explicit valuing of creativity.*

*Certainly I believe there is so much about learning in higher education just now that restricts students' creativity rather than enhances it – the structures for assessment, the dull standard university evaluation forms (I ask students to draw, write poems or short stories for their real evaluation in*

*addition to the formal procedures that have to be followed. I think fear stops many social workers (or their managers) from trying out new ways of working but if this is overcome or recognised, then creativity that is in everyone can be released to produce better problem solving, more imaginative ways of direct work with service users, more authentic communication with users who do not have 'a voice' or for a variety of reasons cannot use their voice.*

*Fear of failure and of 'getting it wrong'. Unfortunately public perceptions of social work have had a very significant impact. I believe that students need to be helped to understand that often there is simply no one right or quick answer (even if you provide a quick 'holding' intervention) to complex issues that have often built up over time (after all if there were you wouldn't need a social worker!) but there may be a series of 'good enough' responses which are professionally viable and acceptable in a situation and 'defensible' i.e. you are creative and accountable but you don't have to be 'defensive'. It is possible to be both creative and accountable as a social work practitioner but it does take a degree of confidence and often time – which has to be developed and built up through education and training. Also supervision in the first post is so crucial and sadly often lacking.*

*Therefore the factors that are worrying students and stereotypes they hold about what can and can't happen need unpacking before students can feel creative about the social work role. This is sometimes difficult for those students who have worked 'unqualified' for some time but I think the role of education is to engage with what is already happening in practice but by no means uncritically so that creativity comes from critical reflection (Schon etc. etc. and the 'swampy lowland' which is where some agencies seem to stick). At the same time agencies have much to say to educators about what they need us to provide and educators can't be creative relevantly if they fail to listen to what practitioners are saying about their working environments.*

*Where there are stupid ones [imperatives], like badly designed systems of GSCC, complexity of getting CRB, internal paperwork of HEI etc – time and energy of staff can be drained and therefore harder to stimulate this in others... sometimes pace of change, or irrelevant nature of change in social policy/legislation fills the curriculum and students' minds with so many new facts to absorb, it is hard to make space to use the new situation creatively.*

*Not having dedicated teaching space. Few rooms "owned" by a department cuts down on use of props, visual stimulate on the walls.*

*"Hassles" like equipment breaking down, so you don't want to rely on it. Often associated with money (lack of) for best computers etc.*

*Money – generally – student debt, funding for HEIs, funding for LAs – targets dictate and targets are usually for factual things like a certain number of people must use direct payments by a certain date – creativity may be the best way to achieve this, but it's not how the performance indicator is phrased, so organisations and therefore their staff tend to try linear approaches before realising they need to be creative. This impacts on what the students find in practice learning settings.*

*Lack of time and resources to work with practice learning settings, employers etc. to work together, so it is easy for HEIs to come across as "ivory tower" if students are encouraged to be creative if practitioners/managers don't know this is being suggested within the context of the real world.*

*Ongoing impact of poor/basic practice from qualified practitioners.*

*Ongoing problems with the language used in care management. "Purchasing" implies buying something which someone else offers, off the shelf, not having a dialogue with the provider as to what you actually want. Direct payments can help in some circumstances, but does nothing for the sort of service that is best supplied collectively. Hence lack of creative practice for students to see working in some areas.*

*The loss of the original values mentioned at start of "make do and mend" etc. in society in general and*

*hence in many of the social work students. Adversity used to be a powerful driver to creativity, but if a student has been brought up not knowing how to cook lentils a hundred ways when they need to save for something and they are just used to seeing simple things like food packaged and ready, then they can tend to think along the lines of solutions being packaged and ready. So you have to contribute to a culture shift in the student as a whole person as well as trying to promote creativity specifically in SW.*

*Some assignments which require definite skills and learning to be demonstrated according to a specific pattern and formula. The pressure regarding completing written assignments while on placement means that on occasions there is little time to learn valuable lessons from mistakes or less skilled work. Essays and assignments are about demonstrating competence so opportunities to try something different, be more creative, could be risky.*

### **How do we know something is creative?**

*I suppose one last comment relates to the question of 'how do you know it's creative?' I'm reminded of the quote in one of Bill Reid's book from a student social worker who, when told after a role play that she hadn't seemed very empathic said well, I felt empathic! It doesn't matter how creative somebody feels or doesn't feel much depends on what they do with it and how it is experienced by others.*

### **Importance of Creativity in Undergraduate Social Work Education**

The impression is gained that, although many of the people responding to the questionnaire value creativity, the disciplinary community as a whole does not place high value on it. A number of respondents highlight the political context that at best marginalizes the need for creativity.

*I have been a social work academic for quite a while and I think that creativity is less apparent now, both in training and in practice, than it was when I started.*

*There are clearly tensions in a number of responses which convey on the one hand a need for creativity in the complex, interactive, people-focused, and unpredictable role of the Social Worker and the determinist, managerialist and competency-based frameworks and evidence-based practice which seem to at best marginalize the need for creativity within which the role is enacted. The political influence on creativity of centrally controlled work force development is stronger in social work than in any other discipline.*

*A pretty low place. If it were given more prominence as a desired learning outcome, it would be more valued. Blame Ron Dearing.*

*Probably not. I don't think anyone has an explicit agenda against it, but by the same token, I don't think we purposely try to weave into our curriculum ways to foster students' creativity.*

*Depending on how you define creativity, I think it could be argued it is a vital component of a good social worker. If creativity is looking outside the box, seeing things from a different perspective or experiencing oneself differently, then effectively doing and promoting these things in others are essential for good practice. While we try to offer these things throughout the course in terms of exposing the students to different theories or frameworks for looking at things (as well as encouraging them to start to identify the lens through which they already view the world), fostering a greater degree of creativity (within each other as well as students) might improve our efforts and help bridge that considerable gap between theory and practice.*

*Certainly I believe there is so much about learning in higher education just now that restricts students' creativity rather than enhances it. I see the value of developing creativity in social work education – when students go out to their practice learning and apply their learning – using drama with young*



offenders, drawing/painting with young people who've been abused, music and movement with older people, mental health service users and those people with learning difficulties. I recognise some of this is focused on using the creative arts (music, dance, visual art, drama) but it is based on the belief that developing the innate creativity in students enables them to work in an empowering and creative way with service users. One external examiner has pointed out that fostering creativity in social work students is a very powerful way of them learning about issues of power/oppression etc. as this way of working has to be experienced. It is about new ways of knowing, other than the purely cognitive and rational.

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