Serendipity: incidental learning associated with student-centred supervision

Dr Jan Moore  
School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University

Ms Berni Murphy  
Bass Coast Shire Council

Introduction: background context and research method

In health the purpose of field work varies with differing clinical or social health requirements for student experiences (Butterworth & Faugier 1992; Egan & Testa 2010). In public health education the focus of developing graduates to be work ready has concentrated on students undertaking set projects in a health related setting (Patrick & Moore 2008). Supervisory approaches vary according to the objectives of the field experience as detailed by the educational institution and workplace expectations (Egan & Testa 2010). Supervisor experience, background and practice style as well as the student’s educational level and professional experience can impact on the supervisory approach taken (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden 2010). Hence, the supervisor-student relationship is critical to learning and development as Cooper and colleagues emphasise “… it is through this relationship that learning occurs” (Cooper et al. 2010, p.125). This paper argues project-centred approaches may miss important learning opportunities that equip students in the day to day operational activities of public health practice. Given the emphasis on the delivery of tangible outcomes for the agency, project-centred WIL settings have the potential to isolate the student from the real world of work, especially operational know-how or what is referred to in this paper as workplace intelligence.

Supervision of students is regarded as a process that involves a professional relationship between the student and agency supervisor with the aim to assist the student to prepare for professional practice (Egan & Testa 2010). Put simply, supervision is an exchange between professionals about practice (Butterworth & Faugier 1992). Social work literature suggests three functions of placement supervision; educative, supportive and administrative (Kadushin & Harkness 2002). Such functions could easily transfer to other allied health areas such as the supervision of public health students. Of particular interest to this paper are education and support in the supervision process, and how these functions are applied in practice. According to Egan and Testa (2010) an educative function promotes professional competencies and skill development in order to draw the links between theory and practice. An educative function is seen as a mutual process of giving and receiving and promotes opportunities to learn within the agency environment. Hence, this function encourages supervision that is responsive to student needs and integrates supervisor experience with student professional development (Egan & Testa 2010). Learning from a mentor in a supported environment is pertinent for preparing students for the world of work as expertise can be shared through questioning, reflecting and discussion, all ways in which the student can develop a better understanding of the incidental workings of practice (Cooper et al. 2010).

Integration of work with learning emphasises the need to differentiate from classroom learning with a shift from theory to a focus on practice, organisational outcomes and the working environment (Cooper et al. 2010). WIL curriculum in the final year of the public health degree requires students to complete 120 hours of practicum which is typically focused on the delivery of a tangible project or set of tasks for the host agency (Patrick & Moore 2008). This arrangement has worked well in the past given that host agencies partner with the university on a goodwill basis and have an expectation of set deliverables in exchange for hosting a student (Woodman 2007). However, research by Purcell (2009) on graduate perceptions of WIL experiences highlighted the importance of incidental workplace learning, what Cooper and colleagues (2010) refer to as the important development of tacit workplace knowledge. Such knowledge comes from working closely with a supervisor to observe and learn from the supervisor’s experience, particularly their expertise to assess situations, make decisions and take appropriate action (Cooper et al. 2010). Therefore, if programs aim to provide an experience that prepares students for practice, it is important to understand how particular supervisory approaches enhance workplace intelligence of public health practice.

This paper presents a case study of Deakin University’s public health practicum program. The case study draws on three separate data sets. The first involved a mixed methods analysis of agency perspectives of Deakin University’s WIL programs in public health (Woodman 2007). The second was a qualitative study of graduate perceptions of Deakin University’s WIL programs in public health (Purcell 2009). The final data set draws from reflective journal entries of an undergraduate student who was undertaking a WIL placement in February 2012.
The reflective journal entries are included in the findings to highlight the benefits gained from a more student-centred, less project-focused WIL experience. Thematic analysis was undertaken of the qualitative data from the first study, together with the data from the second study and the student reflections. Ethics for the two projects in 2007 and 2009 was approved by Deakin University. Permission to use reflective practice quotes was kindly granted by the undergraduate student in February 2012.

Findings

A case study approach was employed to capture a collective understanding of the stakeholders involved in the public health WIL program. This approach offers a means of gathering or binding information pertinent to the cohort (Patton 2002), often achieved by employing a number of different sources of evidence (Yin 2003). This case study draws on agency needs and barriers in hosting students, and highlights the value of WIL programs in developing student capacity and understanding of public health practice from a graduate perspective. It also demonstrates deeper learning in action through reflective comments from a public health student on practicum where student-centred supervision was employed.

Agency perspectives

Overall the public health practicum program is well received by partner agencies. With most keen to be involved as a means of increasing productivity in a resource poor sector (Woodman 2007). For example, students assist in the development of “… specific projects that may or may not have been done without students” (cited in Woodman 2007, p.48). Although agencies stated that their intention for hosting students was to provide learning opportunities in order to foster future public health professionals (Woodman 2007), the benefit of tangible outcomes tended to facilitate agency uptake of students in WIL opportunities. Consequently, agencies consider the quality of student knowledge, skill base and public health competencies as exceptional, particularly where project deliverables are met and implemented by the agency (Woodman 2007). However, it appears that a cyclical pattern of project-centred experiences that reward agencies with tangible outcomes dominates the student learning experience.

Additionally, Woodman’s research identified supervisor time and a lack of organisational support as barriers to hosting students (2007). Supervisors suggested that workplace demands restricted face to face time with practicum students, which in turn impacted on the way they approached fieldwork supervision:

The only barrier from an organisation’s point of view is the time spent and needed to support and supervise the student … there is insufficient time to provide proper supervision (cited in Woodman 2007, p.44).

Similarly, Woodman (2007) suggests that agencies felt there was a lack of understanding on how to adequately supervise students. Agencies wanted direction and training from the university in order to develop a greater understanding of agency roles and responsibilities in regard to student supervision (Woodman 2007). Clarity of agency, student and university roles was considered pertinent to the confidence and style of supervision agencies provided. Indeed developing confidence and capacity of supervisors has the potential to develop more competent, student-centred supervisory approaches in the future.

Student learning and development in the workplace is important to agencies. However, Woodman’s research has identified barriers to supporting placements that foster workplace intelligence in readiness for practice. In particular the transfer of workplace know-how requires the university to support and equip supervisors to be more actively engaged in student-centred supervision. This shift in principal is important, but in practice faces challenges where public health practicum programs are reliant on agency goodwill.

Graduate perspectives

Engaging in WIL experiences provides substantial learning outcomes for students (Purcell 2009). Graduates felt a practicum experience gave valuable exposure to organisational structure and a greater understanding of the public health sector. Importantly, supervisory roles impacted on the overall rewards of a placement experience favouring qualities in supervisors where attention was given to mentoring and discussion of organisational know-how and responsibilities (Purcell 2009). Although set tasks and project work was invaluable to test theory and confidence, graduates felt they gained more from engaging in the activities of the workplace (Purcell 2009). For example, exposure to the intricacy of public health politics, funding, problem solving and decision making were critical to building graduate employability skills and attributes. Importantly, graduates acknowledged that
before undertaking fieldwork such notions of workplace intelligence were not considered pertinent to professional development:

… there is value or understanding of where you sit organisationally within the broader health sector… [understanding] how you [your organisation] fit in based on your funding arrangements and the work you do is not appreciated as a student (cited in Purcell 2009, p.37).

Indeed for the participants of Purcell’s research exposure to workplace intelligence and organisational culture facilitated a deeper learning experience and was considered by graduates as key lessons of the field (Purcell 2009). Most importantly, graduates came away from the practicum with greater confidence about the nuances of working in public health. Those who were mentored on the incidental activities of the workplace rather than simply supervised on a project were the students who gained more from the practicum experience (Purcell 2009). Mentoring aligns well with student-centred supervision where educative and supportive functions of supervision go beyond project content and encourage professional growth and career development. For graduates in Purcell’s study the long-term mentor relationships that formed and continue beyond the student placement are highly valued outcomes of the practicum program.

**Student perspectives**

As noted in by Purcell (2009), when entering into a practicum arrangement, students tend to focus on the delivery of tangible outcomes for the host agency. They assume undertaking set tasks and project work is a test of academic knowledge and application (Purcell 2009). Thus, the following discussion highlights the rewards of one student entering a practicum experience that challenged both academic knowledge and the engagement in higher level thinking of agency strategies, problems and decision making. This student-centred supervisory approach required the student and supervisor to firstly negotiate and state what they both wanted from the WIL experience before commencing the practicum. Subsequent student tasks, roles, activities and observations of the workplace were established to deliver a set project, and also for the student to “… have an opportunity to experience aspects of public health practice in a real life context and to increase skills and experience of health promotion” (Journal Entry – February 2012). The student was required to work closely with the supervisor and attend to the daily operational management and implementation of public health initiatives and practice. Understanding the work environment in this way assisted in the development of contextual skills that drew academic knowledge and supervisor experience together to enhance the student’s ability to react, manage, problem solve and contextualise aspects of the working role public health practitioners undertake:

My core project will be reviewing the Municipal Public Health Plan which will be an invaluable skill in the context of local government, … however, the daily tasks will involve me in a range of other council activities and will have me work on other projects (Journal Entry February - 2012).

Reflecting on this approach, the student identified the benefit of learning at work and how the educative function of supervision importantly develops and supports learning beyond theory. The student acknowledged the experience and qualities of the supervisor to provide learning opportunities that were challenging yet essential to public health practice, such as communicating, networking, collaborating and building partnerships:

What [my supervisor] designed is an authentic workplace experience by giving me a range of tasks and activities to undertake. I felt a little stumped for a while about how to approach something that was essentially made up of everyday activities until I realised that each of these types of activities were part of the one project – of having an authentic experience (Journal Entry February - 2012).

Importantly, what was valued by the student was the sharing of knowledge by the supervisor to assist the student to develop professionally. The mentoring relationship that emerged took the supervisor-student role to a deeper and more complex level in what Egan and Testa (2010) consider to be the educative and supportive functions of supervision:

… it is invaluable to have a supervisor that is knowledgeable, passionate and insightful, and that my supervisor is taking this role on as a mentoring opportunity. I am realising how valuable it is in promoting learning and understanding (Journal Entry February - 2012).

The journal entries highlight student development is far greater than undertaking set tasks and the delivery of project outcomes. A public health practicum experience that is student-centred and values participation and
mentoring has the potential to “… enable students to recognise, access and understand tacit knowledge in operation” (Cooper et al. 2010, p.61).

Such a progression from project based experiences to a more integrated, student-centred approach to supervision takes leadership and mentoring qualities, however, the training and support of this approach needs to be acknowledged from universities and developers of fieldwork programs.

Conclusions

This paper provides a case study example of how a shift from a task oriented practicum to a more student-centred has merit in preparing students to be work ready graduates. Students bring theoretical content and knowledge to a practicum, however, this paper demonstrates the importance of the practicum experience in fostering workplace intelligence so that students develop a more complex understanding of the roles and responsibilities of public health practice. Hence, it is important for educators to acknowledge that WIL is not only about demonstrating theory in a workplace setting, but there is an obligation to enhance student experiences to be more supportive in the development of workplace intelligence. Documentation of a tangible piece of work while on placement may add value to a graduate’s resume, however, the lessons gained from being involved in the day to day challenges of the field according to Purcell (2009) are as important to professional development.

Further research into supervisory approaches of WIL students in health courses that do not require demonstration of clinical competency (such as public health) will further the understanding of what experiences are important in developing more work ready graduates. Where opportunities are created to interpret the role of practice and the many facets of workplace intelligence, such as the day to day roles that require problem solving, prioritising of tasks, management and response measures, this serendipitous learning will become formalised and the value of workplace intelligence acknowledged.

References


Copyright © 2012 Jan Moore, Ms Berni Murphy

The author(s) assign to the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN Inc.) an educational non-profit institution, a nonexclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction, provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author(s) also grant a non-exclusive licence to the Australian Collaborative Education Network to publish this document on the ACEN website and in other formats for the Proceedings ACEN National Conference Melbourne / Geelong 2012. Any other use is prohibited without the express permission of the author(s).