Stories from the field…

Learning Circles and their use for building student capacity for inclusive WIL

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<th>University/Institution: Griffith University</th>
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<td>Name/title of example of inclusive WIL practice: Circles of Change Revisited: an innovative approach to field education</td>
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<td>Key contact: Jennifer Cartmel (Kym Macfarlane, Marilyn Casley, Kerry Smith)</td>
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<td>Key Words: reflection; self-awareness; critical thinking; critical conversations; theory/practice nexus</td>
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General information:
The Child and Family Studies team at Griffith University has a focus on developing the skills of critical reflection for those who undertake professional work with children and families. Their work stems from a teaching and learning grant (awarded in 2003) that developed the highly effective Circles of Change Revisited model (Cartmel, Macfarlane & Casley, 2012; Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2012). The model has developed into a tool (commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) to be used nationally by the children's services sector for pre-service training and professional development. The tool supports the implementation of critical reflection as part of every educator’s core practice, thus supporting the facilitation of quality practices in early childhood settings.

Circles of Change Revisited (COCR) is a method used to engage professionals from a variety of disciplines in critical reflection and conversation. The process consists of four steps and involves groups of professionals, in deconstructing, confronting, theorising and thinking otherwise about a phenomenon or issue within practice. Initially within the deconstruct stage, participants clarify their perspectives about a phenomenon and listen to one another to understand the various perspectives that exist. During the second stage, confronting, participants build on the perspectives of the group and confront the subject of conversation and their own values and beliefs, highlighting some of the inherit ideas that are accepted and rarely questioned about an issue. The third stage, theorise, involves participants thinking about the source of their ideas. Finally, during the think otherwise stage, participants gather the variety of perspectives presented about an issue by examining previously marginalised perspectives, and develop a position, solution or idea, while encouraging change. Each COCR session takes approximately 60 minutes to undertake.

Building student capacity:
University students are placed in childcare centres in groups of four (2 for the infant/toddler room and 2 for pre-school age). The four students, two/three childcare practitioners and a university facilitator participate in COCR three times during the four week field education experience, with all stakeholders actively engaged in supporting student learning. There are alternative configurations of building student capacity including holding weekly or fortnightly circles on campus. The COCR can be described as intense guided reflective conversation. The over-riding approach is “democracy in action”, where the learning circles encourage all views to be expressed and explored, irrespective of whether you are a student, childcare professional or university staff. The process of discussion and reflection generates new knowledge for the student and the experience empowers them to act on the basis of this new knowledge.
For students from culturally diverse backgrounds, low socio-economic backgrounds or those who are first in their family to attend university, the COCR approach provides both space and a common language for different experiences, perspectives and other ways of knowing to be acknowledged and expressed. Importantly, the COCR model helps reveal to students the tacit knowledge of both childcare professionals and university facilitators, exposing the unspoken wisdom and know-how that sometimes remains hidden to students during field placement experiences. These ‘revealing’ critical conversations help debunk myths and challenge perceptions for students as well as others within the group. These conversations also play an important role with respect to some of the learning barriers students can face in work-integrated learning (WIL) more generally, barriers associated with the power dynamics between student and workplace supervisor. The COCR model provides a way to help minimise this challenge and foster professional respect amongst all members of the COCR. Collectively, these features provide an inclusive approach to making sense of theory and practice in field based educational experiences.

The COCR model has led to childcare centres seeking Griffith students for placements and students are also benefitting with good employment results upon graduation.

Other capacity building features:
The COCRs model means there are fewer placement sites for university staff to visit. Money saved is redirected to pay for “relief staff” at childcare centres so centre directors and staff can attend the COCRs. This involvement in COCRs provides professional development opportunities for partners, where they are able to “upskill” in areas including: communication skills, cultural competency, evidence based practice. The COCR gives childcare professionals a tool to help them challenge and rethink their practices.

“Inclusive” successes:
Professionals participating in projects using the COCR method have highlighted problem identification, honouring multiple perspectives, and thinking critically as process outcomes. Generally, professionals participating in the process characterise COCR as a method to aid practice by encouraging change through dialogue and respect for multiple perspectives. For example, within the PIPI project, professionals supporting early childhood education and care centres throughout Queensland suggested that the methodology enabled them to identify, support and include multiple perspectives within decision making, while also supporting their ability confront and think otherwise about aspects of their practice.

The Circles of Change are also used now to underpin teaching and to support students in other areas of learning, such as conducting literature reviews. The COCR model has been further used in interdisciplinary settings.

For more information about COCs visit: