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Article

Utilising the ‘common third’ to enhance social work education

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Abstract

This article considers the utilisation of the common third to prepare social work students for practice by engaging with education in the broadest sense of the term (Jackson and Cameron, 2011). Quality social work practitioners need fully developed reflective capacities to assist with the complex issues faced by individuals who experience marginalisation, discrimination, and inequality. In order to help develop autonomous and critical thinkers, which is of the utmost importance for social work, this article considers the value of the common third as part of the learning process. The common third, using activities to strengthen relationships, enhances social work practice and this article evaluates a three-day residential experience of outdoor pursuits in partnership with students, service users, practice educators, and teaching staff. This experience has been undertaken for several years at the University of West London, funded by the Education Support Grant from the Department of Health. Until now only anecdotal accounts were available; however, in 2018 staff sought written and verbal feedback from participants to assist in the writing of this article. This is based on the 2018 experience of 45 first-year social work students, six academic staff members, three service users, and two social work practice educators. The findings support the positive anecdotal accounts given to date and highlight the benefits of the common third in social work education.

Keywords: social pedagogy; social work education; common third; *Haltung*; social work training; structural social work; Bourdieusian social work

I really treasure this experience and I think it is truly unforgettable.

I loved every part of it and feel like it really allowed me to connect with my colleagues and lecturers. I think this enabled me to get to know more about my colleagues and showed us that we all have different boundaries. I've gotten close with my colleagues and I feel more comfortable and confident in my class. I feel like this really enabled us to build closer relationship and work as a team.

(Student comment, November 2018)

Social work education, social pedagogy, shared perspectives

The social work degree at the University of West London was established with the ethos of being framed within a New Structural Approach (NSA) to social work practice (Mullaly, 2006). The NSA acknowledges the shortcomings of conventional social work, which starts from the premise that society is fair and just. NSA seeks to acknowledge and address the systemic shortcomings in the present social order and challenge the inherent oppression resulting from conventional social work practice. In addition, we engage with Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Practice as a method to understand and challenge inequalities and the recurrence of oppression for marginalised groups. The emphasis of these approaches and associated value base aligns itself well with the core principles familiar in social pedagogy. As Ryyänen and Nivala (2019) note, 'it is necessary to see the connectedness of individual hardships with wider and deeper societal structures of inequality' (p. 1). In establishing a social work degree committed to a structural perspective of challenging inequality, anti-oppressive practice, the dignity of human beings, and the value inherent in every individual – alongside a practising belief in social justice and human rights, as per the International Federation of Social Workers definition – it is apparent that social work from this perspective is a comfortable bedfellow with social pedagogy. In conjunction with this is the contested role of education and its propensity to be either a factor for reproducing inequality or for challenging and enhancing equality to create a more just society (Naidoo, 2004).

Hämäläinen (2003) suggests that 'in some European countries the concept of social pedagogy has great significance in social work' (p. 69); this is less marked in the UK, as Hämäläinen adds (2003), 'the concept of social pedagogy has not gained a footing for example in Anglo-American countries' (p. 70). Freire, whose work and ideas were introduced in my own social work education, are often cited within the social pedagogic tradition (Kaska, 2016), and his ideas have therefore had some influence in social work in the UK context. Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970), cited on social work reading lists in the 1980s, enabled students to gain an insight into the nature of oppression and how to develop empathy for dispossessed peoples. While the nature of social work education is changing, it is still imperative to retain the commitment to anti-oppressive practice, inequality, and social justice. Freire's work highlights that teaching and learning are also instrumental in the politics of education in its widest sense, recognising the role education can play in alleviating oppression and inequalities. This is in contrast to Bourdieu (1993, cited in Mills, 2008) who suggests education is the vehicle for reproducing inequality. However, the shared ambitions of social work and social pedagogy to confront and alleviate social distress and strive for equality are extremely pertinent in the context of social work education. This is particularly so as social work is taught in higher education establishments, which are recognised by Bourdieu (1993, cited in Naidoo, 2004), a keen advocate of equality, as a powerful tool in the maintenance and reproduction of inequality.

Hämäläinen (2003) suggests there are three theories in the literature to account for the relationship between social pedagogy and social work, notably:

- Social pedagogy and social work completely differ from each other
- Social pedagogy and social work are identical
- Social pedagogy and social work complement each other. (p. 75)

The position adopted here is the latter: that social pedagogy and social work complement each other and can gain from shared knowledge (Hämäläinen, 2003). Social pedagogy and social work both share historical challenges of definition and are often regarded as contested concepts (Payne and Askeland, 2008; Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011; Hämäläinen, 2003; Smith, 2012). While social pedagogy and

social work have different meanings and purposes depending on their geographical locations, their shared aspirations should be celebrated. The shared common denominators and fundamental principles of each are reflected in their respected definitions:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (IFSW, 2014, n.p.)

Social pedagogy originates in the promotion of social justice and equality in society, via the instrument of education, facilitating individuals' growth in confidence and self-efficacy in dealing with life's challenges (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). Kaska (2016) describes it thus:

Social pedagogy is an ethical, theoretical and practical approach to practice, training education and policy ... It aims to create a more just society through educational measures and through the holistic development of individuals and groups ... Social pedagogy directly supports people to reach their potential and also works towards developing an understanding of and reducing or overcoming social structural obstacles to full participation and inclusion in community and society. (pp. 13–15)

It is also envisaged that social work and social pedagogy collectively seek to promote a shared vision of a more humane, productive, caring, and egalitarian society.

To enable social work students and practitioners to facilitate social change, challenge inequalities, alleviate social distress, understand the complexities of social work engagement with individuals who are socially marginalised, discriminated against, and have an unequal share of benefits and resources, social work students and practitioners need more than competency and rational-based approaches to their interventions. Smith (2012) has highlighted 'it is increasingly recognised that the technical rational forms of knowledge to be evidenced in vocational qualifications are problematic in [the] people professions' (p. 47), primarily, as the problems identified have contested resolutions. In the vocational approach the focus tends towards individual failings and a deficit model, as seen in the Troubled Families agenda 2015–17.

Families on the current programme will continue to have at least two of the following problems:

- Parents or children involved in crime or anti-social behaviour
- Children who are not attending school regularly
- Children who need help; that is children of all ages, who need help, are identified as in need or are subject to a child protection plan
- Adults out of work or at risk of financial exclusion or young people at risk of worklessness
- Families affected by domestic violence or abuse parents or children with a range of physical and mental health problems. (MHCLG, 2017, n.p.)

Developing effective practitioners who are reflective, autonomous, and critical thinkers requires more than an ability to regurgitate textbooks, follow set procedures, or adhere rigidly to perceived best practice; it requires practitioners to acknowledge the inherent qualities and strengths of each individual, value human rights and social justice, and be able to recognise all the factors contributing to the circumstances being experienced. The task of social work in helping individuals and communities to achieve satisfaction, growth, purpose, and dignity in their lives also requires that social workers are able to build meaningful and positive relationships in a non-oppressive and supportive manner (Trevithick, 2014).

As Smith (2012, citing Lonne et al., 2009, and Munro, 2011), highlights:

Social pedagogy might also offer an opportunity to reclaim some of the hopes and aspirations that were around during the early years of social work. It incorporates a structural as well as an individual focus, which offers a counterpoint to the individualizing and pathologising approaches that have come to dominate social work practice. (p. 53)

Social work relationships and *Haltung*

To engage effectively in social work practice and to build positive relationships requires social workers to have authenticity and a value base that is not just superficially connecting with people. In ensuring this, social workers should invoke the 'Kantian maxim, which defines every human as being of absolute and unique value' (Hämäläinen, 2003, p. 77). In social work teaching this is often reflected in the incorporation of Rogers' (1967) concept of 'unconditional positive regard' as a basis for all interactions. Another of Rogers' core concepts, or conditions as he calls them, is congruence; this translates to the beliefs, values and authentic actions in how we engage with others. In social pedagogy this mindset, belief system, attitude, and demeanour is known as *Haltung*. It is through *Haltung* that individuals express their true values and beliefs.

While *Haltung* may not be a term familiar to aspiring social work practitioners, 'warmth, empathy and genuineness' are familiar terms utilised from Rogers' client-centred perspective (Greene, 2017). Hämäläinen (2003) also notes that actions and certain methods alone do not produce social pedagogy; it is the mindset and way of being attached to them (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). However, in order to engage with the mindset effectively and to develop one's *Haltung*, it is imperative that individuals know themselves. Kaushik (2017, cited in Charfe and Gardner, 2019) posits that 'knowing self is a precondition of knowing others' (p. 34). It is by being able to reflect and know oneself that enables a student to develop a positive relationship with others. As Trevithick (2014) has pointed out, effective social workers must be able to build positive and sustainable relationships, as 'emotionally responsive relationship-based practice [needs] to be located at the heart of social work practice' (p. 287).

Positive relationships also require partnerships – this means challenging social positions of perceived hierarchies and seeing oneself working together with others. As with social pedagogy, social work is concerned with enhancing well-being, improving life circumstances, and assisting individuals to grow and develop. To enable social work practitioners to do this we encourage social work students to become engaged in creative thinking and creative activities. Hatton (2013) noted that by doing so, 'we are able to challenge the structural and class oppression faced in modern society' (p. 31).

Social work education principles

As with social work practitioners, it is equally important that the educators in social work also develop positive relationships with students. We aim to do this through the approach we take to learning. Teaching sessions consist of a wide range of activities, which challenge students to 'think outside the box'. Most students believe when they join the social work degree that they are fully cognisant of discrimination and prejudice and they themselves do not hold sexist, racist, or oppressive attitudes. In undertaking activities and exercises on the first day of the degree they very quickly become aware this is not the case. When asked to consider a puzzle regarding a child needing an emergency operation, all cohorts over the past ten years have invariably assumed the surgeon to be a male. From the student group of 40+ each year, it has been rare to have more than three or four students resolve the puzzle appropriately, despite the cohort being predominately female (Hofstadter, 1982).

To explore these personal views that will affect student social workers in the professional domain, we also utilise the 3P Model (Figure 1). Kaska (2016) explain Jappe's model as consisting of 'three spheres; the Professional, the Personal and the Private' (p. 49). In engaging with a range of activities within the education setting, it has become apparent we are utilising this model. As part of the getting-to-know-each-other exercises, staff and students are asked to share four facts about themselves, of which three must be truthful and one fictitious. The exercise then explores which of the facts is a lie. In this exercise students and educators explore and engage by sharing information in a professional context, yet they are opening up part of their personal information while still retaining what is private to them. From this activity we all learn about each other and recognise that what is on the surface may not be an accurate representation of any individual. Subsequent reflection on this exercise highlights the use of the 3P model in helping to maintain professional boundaries. This activity allows for students to get to know each other, to start forming positive relationships, and to build confidence in new surroundings. Other activities include the train track puzzle (Hofstadter, 1982) or the cycle ride developed during the

BSc Introduction to social work (session 1) at the University of West London between 2018 and 2019. Both activities highlight the subtle manner in which entrenched views of gender and race are absorbed, and serve to raise awareness of inequality and social injustice.

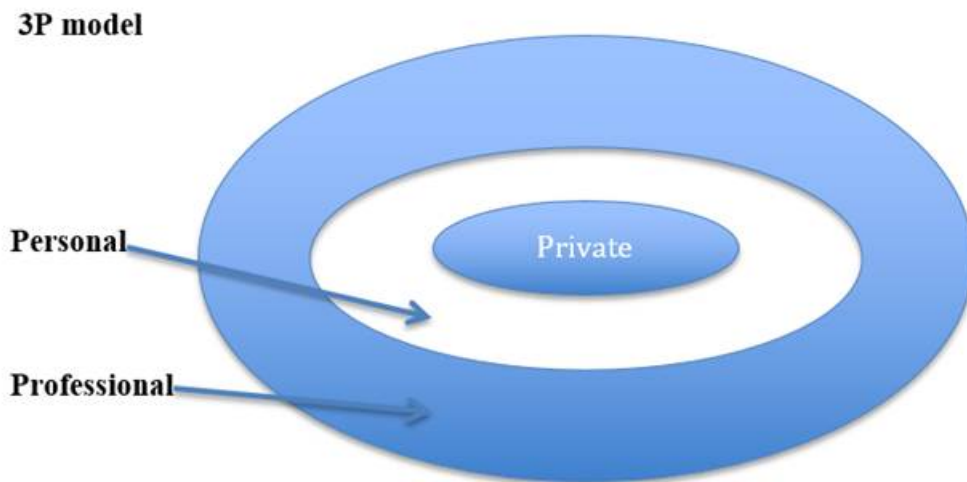


Figure 1. 3P Model [© 2010, E. Jappe].

Common third

While there are numerous other activities that occur throughout the course, by far one of the most beneficial experiences, which the students and staff undertake, is the three-day residential trip to an outdoor pursuits centre in southern England. This experience creates an opportunity for staff, students, users of services, and educators from social work practice to bond together and share memorable experiences. In this process students engage in creative, or as Freire (1970) suggests, liberating education. Pouwels (2019) describes this as ‘liberating inquiry and problem posing education’ (p. 4). This fits within the description of the common third provided by Hatton (2013) as ‘an activity or an experience they have together which feels unique in a positive way’ (p. 53). Ryyänen and Nivala (2019) describe it as an experience that provides ‘an arena for equal sharing and participation’ (p. 12). Throughout the process all participants engage in a range of activities and experiences that enables participants to become familiar with the Learning Zone Model (see Figure 2).

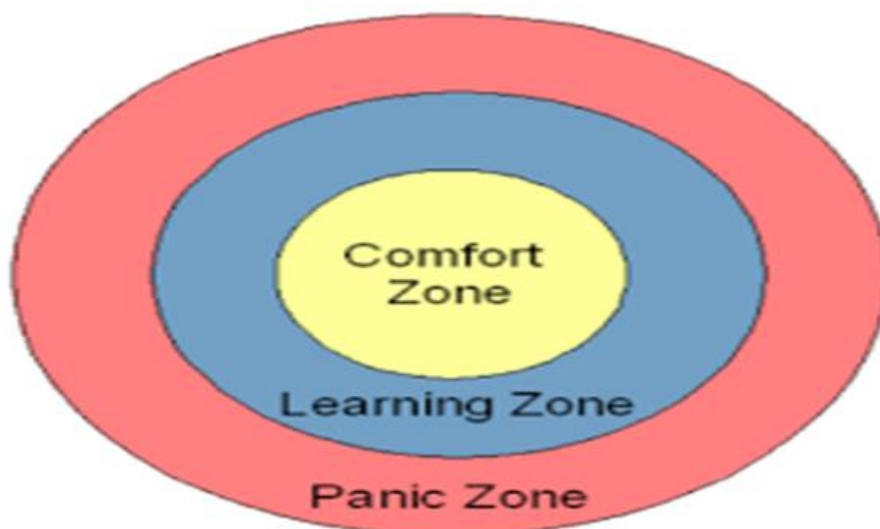


Figure 2. Learning zone model [© ThemPra Social Pedagogy, n.d.].

In this model, participants gain an acute awareness of their comfort, learning, or panic zone, when being asked to engage in activities such as ascending Jacob's Ladder, climbing tall trees from high zipwires, doing the leap of faith, learning to build rafts to cross water, or going for night walks in the woods. During this process all participants are acutely aware of their own comfort and panic zone and the learning that takes place between the two. These activities have consistently stretched all participants, and the instructors have described the experience as being similar to blowing up balloons and letting the air out – after each experience, like the balloon, the learning experience is left slightly bigger.

In addition to being able to recognise the Learning Zone Model in action, participants can also appreciate how hidden underneath every individual is the capacity to shine and gleam. [Eichsteller and Holthoff \(2012\)](#) describe this as the Diamond Model, an acknowledgement that although things may look rough and coarse on the outside, hidden in every individual is a gem. This is a 'core principle of social pedagogy; the unconditional value of human beings' ([Kaska, 2016](#), p. 44). The individual achievements of each participant enable aspiring practitioners to see the capacity and strengths in themselves and others. Perceptions about every individual change dramatically as the days progress. This is demonstrated through the increased level of excitement and willingness to participate, alongside comments made on the completion of each activity. The activities expand individual comfort zones and the glee of achievement alongside support from peers is tangible. The student-led presentations on the final day reiterate the personal and group achievements from the experiences. Of significant importance all participants begin to feel responsible for the well-being of the others, with whom they are sharing these exhilarating activities. They recognise in themselves and others the impact of facing new challenges or being in unfamiliar territory (and out of their comfort zone), while also witnessing firsthand the untapped potential inherent in all individuals and the opportunities to explore this to liberate people. In this way, significant insight is gained into the experiences of potential users of services. Alongside these new experiences, trust, unity, and solidarity are developed.

On the second evening of the trip, activities are coordinated by students who collaborate to provide games that are all-inclusive. This has always been a great source of fun and amusement, and many tears flow from the laughter generated. The following morning the final day focuses on sharing and reflecting on the participants' learning. Students choose the mode of sharing their learning and reflections, although usually most present a comedy sketch, a 'live from here' report, or a chat show. This is invariably hilarious yet is most often followed by deep and sensitive insights into their personal growth and cohesion over the short period of time spent together, with one student commenting, 'I don't see you as fellow students and staff, I see you all as my brothers and sisters.' Through this experience, participants fully appreciate the benefits of common third activities and how these can be used to build productive relationships in future practice. Although many of the students are mature adults, this experience has proved to be consistently one of the most memorable parts of the three-year degree. Over the years many students have requested a return visit.

The timetable in [Table 1](#) highlights the activities undertaken over the three days from Monday to Wednesday. Each activity seeks to enable all participants to develop their team skills and to challenge their perceptions or limitations. For example, the 'leap of faith' requires participants (who are securely harnessed) to climb to the top of a large telegraph pole with a small platform on top and, once there, to assist other colleagues to reach the top. When four participants are in place, all are required to take a collective leap of faith. Their colleagues on the ground, who have them securely harnessed, ensure they are kept safe as they jointly leap from the platform.

Table 1. Timetable of activities.

09:00–10:30		A. Leap of faith B. Archery C. High zip D. Tri crane/Problem solving (Adults)	Own activities Instructors invited to watch sketch if available
10:30–10:45	Break	Break	Break
10:45–12:15	Arrive 11.15 am Welcome talk Room allocation	A. Tri crane/Problem solving (Adults) B. Leap of faith C. Archery D. High zip	Own activities Instructors invited to watch sketch if available
12:15–13:15	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
13:15–14:45	Unpack Make up beds	A. High zip B. Tri crane/Problem solving (Adults) C. Leap of faith D. Archery	Depart 14:00
14:45–15:00	Break	Break	Break
15:00–16:30	1/2 Group rafting 1/2 Group bivvi building	A. Archery B. High zip C. Tri crane/Problem solving (Adults) D. Leap of faith	
17:30–18:30	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner
Evening	Night walk		

The ‘tri crane’ is an activity that requires participants situated at different angles in a field to collaborate in placing a large metal drum hung from a high wire onto a safe landing spot. The view from each angle presents a different perspective and in negotiating where the drum needs to be located requires the participants to acknowledge differing perspectives and to collaborate, as attempts to secure the safe landing place are thwarted by incorrect assessments of space and distance if seen from only one perspective.

The ‘high zip’ enables participants to overcome fear of heights, to participate in a collective activity to ensure the safety of others, and to enjoy the exhilaration of a zipwire. For participants unable to climb, other group members assist in the harnessing and hoisting of any individual who wishes to complete the zipwire but is unable to get up the tree.

Other activities include collective action to build a temporary shelter (bivvi building), utilising wooden logs and working collectively to meet the brief given by the instructor. Raft building also explores collaboration and team building, highlighting the importance of listening, watching, and utilising the knowledge of other participants. On completion of the raft out of a range of plastic barrels and ropes, participants are requested individually to cross the small, shallow lake, towed by their colleagues. Life jackets are always provided and on occasions people fall into the water.

On the first evening the lead instructor takes all those who wish to go, for a night walk in the woods, highlighting the differences between city skies and rural countryside. This is often a unique and slightly scary experience for the students, staff, and service users coming from large cities.

Undoubtedly, being placed in these significantly different circumstances from the usual educational environment enables all participants to grow and develop. People overcome unexpected challenges during the three-day experience which, as a result, significantly enhances their confidence and self-belief, and increases their self-esteem (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). For each activity, participants receive encouragement and support from their own group as well as other group members. Furthermore, the activities are always accompanied by an experienced instructor from the centre who ensures safety measures are adhered to, and invariably encourages all participants individually and collectively as a group to stretch their abilities to the edge of their learning zone. Vygotsky (1978, cited in Charfe and Gardner, 2019) argued, ‘learning was most successful in a social context, whereby individuals were supported by someone who is more advanced’ (p. 45).

While all of this learning is taking place, students are also gaining insight to hermeneutics – the ability to see and understand life events from another’s perspective (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). Being away from their own familiar territory, family, and friends, and placed in often considerably different and distant circumstances, unaccustomed to the sleeping arrangements, the food, and the general environment, enables students to reflect on what this must feel like for the children or adults who – for whatever reasons – are moved into some form of foster or residential care. Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice, which explains the discomfort individuals can experience in unfamiliar territory, can be utilised to enable an understanding of the overwhelming feelings many experience in unknown circumstances. This common third activity, therefore, also provides an opportunity to gain awareness of Bourdieu’s (1977) theory and the impact of habitus, capital, and field on future social work practice (McCreadie, 2017).

Benefits of common third in social work education

From the experiences generated by the common third in social work education, it is clear that, aside from being great fun and a pleasure for all concerned, the experience facilitates and replicates Dillon’s findings (Hatton, 2013).

This project based around musical activities reported the following,

- Improved negotiation skills and co-operative working developed through group work.
- Learning to trust peers by relying on and supporting others in the course of the project.
- Enhanced capacity to express themselves and a stronger sense of self-awareness.
- Increased levels of self-discipline and a sense of responsibility for their actions.
- A sense of achievement.
- A positive sense of belonging and a shared identity.
- Making friends through a positive activity.
- Developing positive relationships.
- Having the opportunity to have fun and escape.
- Increased confidence, and increased skills base.
- Increased self-esteem and self-efficacy. (Hatton, 2013, p. 33)

As stated above, these experiences were also replicated with the students from the social work degree participating in a range of outdoor pursuits and team-building activities. The non-traditional aspect of this residential experience of the social work degree is also in keeping with a social pedagogical approach. It is an invaluable part of the degree and utilises the study skills day (Education Support Grant) funding in a manner that provides for personal growth and development. The funding from the Department of Health is commonly used to arrange three days of observing social workers in practice, akin to the requirements originally laid down by the General Social Care Council when it was responsible for social work registration.

With regard to personal development, some of the comments from this year’s student reflections stated:

- This has helped me to identify my strengths and weaknesses in order to progress in my personal, professional and academic development.
- Helpful, interesting and assisted me to discover things about my personality.
- I learnt a lot about myself and the way I consider individuals in society.
- It helped me to draw a lot of self-insight on how I relate with people and my self-limitations.
- In a short amount of time I have learnt things about myself such as my strengths, weaknesses, skills I have and skills and areas I wish to improve and develop.
- The skills needed for social work practice, be fully aware of myself, my body, my health and well-being. (Level 4 cohort, 2018/19)

Importantly, the opportunity for staff, students, service users, and practice educators to ‘inhabit the same life space’ (Hatton, 2013, p. 7) is conducive in helping develop cohesion and understanding amongst participants. It facilitates working towards partnership endeavours and helps to create a more egalitarian and non-hierarchical relationship between participants. It allows for gaining insight to Bourdieu’s (1977)

Theory of Practice, which highlights why individuals whose habitus is familiar with outdoor activities and adventures have less difficulty in adjusting to the environment, meanwhile in those for whom this is a totally new experience, it is an opportunity to understand why different challenges facilitate growth in confidence and capabilities.

The final-day presentations involve considerable reflective thinking; participants often acknowledge that this is the first experience of this kind they have been engaged in. The sense of personal growth is acknowledged and palpable for participants, as the comments have highlighted. Similarly, as [Eichsteller and Holthoff \(2012\)](#) and [Hatton \(2013\)](#) found, by engaging collectively, the students, service users, staff, and practice educators can demonstrate that they genuinely support each other. The reflections state:

- It became evident that all the activities required an action, overcoming barriers and being able to work effectively as part of a team.
- It was truly amazing how you all pushed yourself and showed us that we can all achieve our goals.
- I think this trip took me out of my comfort zone and helped me understand how it may feel for service users to be out their comfort zone.
- The group activities enable me to step out from my comfort zone.
- That experience has made my mind run 1,000 miles per hour.
- It has begun by fundamentally asking us to question who we believe ourselves to be.
- I was expecting to start reading and writing but all we did was get to know each other and also ourselves.
- Brought about new innovation and ideas in the way I used to perceive things or individuals as a whole.
- I did not just learn it enabled the realisation from different perspectives and understanding of how things should be viewed . . . it involves a lot of critical thinking. (Level 4 cohort, 2018/19)

The benefits of utilising the common third in improving social work education cannot be underestimated. From the comments provided, it is clear that this approach significantly increases self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-esteem. A common third approach is also conducive to creating an egalitarian approach to social work practice, as the following comments suggest:

- This taught me a lot about my pre-conceived assumptions about people.
- I generally consider myself to be a non-judgemental person, would profess to hold no prejudicial ideas, as to a person's role or ability . . . the activity would perhaps indicate that, subconsciously, this is not always true.
- I like to think of myself as a very inclusive, open-minded person who embraces diversity, but I fear I have much to learn.

In addition to all the benefits previously highlighted, the residential experience gives insight to the feelings and anxieties felt by the children and adults with whom participants will work in the future. It facilitates links to a range of theoretical perspectives that seek to challenge inequalities and social injustice. Alongside the personal and professional benefits, the cohesion creates a real sense of belonging within the social work degree for all who are involved, and this positively impacts on retention and progression rates.

From the initial open-day sessions to the selection day, candidates for social work are made fully aware that this experience is a required part of the first year of the course. The experience is available to all students and staff, including those with disabilities as reasonable adjustments are always made. Students involved in the selection process, which is unique to the course, consider the experience to be a selling point. On rare occasions, students who have been unable to participate due to caring commitments have lamented their inability to attend. This situation is extremely rare and students are encouraged to attend if possible.

We understand that this is the only university in the UK that currently utilises the study skills day monies of the Education Support Grant (Department of Health) to fund this invaluable common third experience. This really is a missed opportunity. That said, on occasions, it has been challenging to

convince university budget holders of the value this learning experience offers to social work students. This initial research has legitimated the use of the funding for this unique experience.

While common third activities have been part of this course for a number of years, anecdotal comments and frequent requests for a return to the facility prior to graduation suggests this experience is invaluable. However, moving forward, a more in-depth analysis of the experience would be beneficial, notably to ascertain where improvements could be made and to evaluate any limitations this experience may have.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

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