
Special issue: *Everyday Expertise in Social Pedagogy*

Editorial

Introduction: *Everyday Expertise in Social Pedagogy* special issue

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Introduction

We are grateful to the journal editors for allowing us to guest edit this special issue on the theme of everyday expertise. We arrived at this theme by a somewhat circuitous route. We were invited in January 2018 to a seminar at Aalborg University in Denmark that set out to bring together an international group of academics interested in exploring groupwork in social pedagogy. One outcome of this meeting was to take forward a proposal for a journal special issue on the theme of groupwork. We met again in Dundee the following year and each of us prepared a presentation for the group. Despite groupwork being the idea that had brought us together, none of the presentations was obviously about groupwork, or only tangentially so. But what was apparent was an unplanned but discernable convergence of ideas in the presentations around the forms of knowledge underpinning social pedagogic practice and the lack of fit between current dominant ideas about what constitutes knowledge and the nature of such practice. So, recognising that most social pedagogic practice takes place in everyday life-space contexts, the focus of our publication plans took an epistemological turn to consider what might be constitutive of everyday expertise in social pedagogy.

The political and cultural backdrop to current dominant understandings of knowledge is a neoliberal one. Through its handmaiden managerialism, neoliberalism seeks to extend ‘free market’ ideas to every area of our public and personal worlds. It is premised on the assumption that the kind of technical and instrumental knowledge that might have some utility on a production line can be transposed onto welfare services. This assumption is conceptually and, increasingly, empirically problematic, when applied to the ‘people work’ that characterises social pedagogy (and related professions). Nevertheless, it appeals to a ‘common-sense’ view of knowledge that is attractive to policy makers, and indeed many professionals, in promising them something they can call evidence which might ‘ground’ and take some of the uncertainty out of their practice. This has led to a reductionist view of knowledge evident in professional standards broken down into ‘bite-size chunks’ that just need to be demonstrated to provide evidence of proficiency and in training packages that just need to be followed to furnish the full range of positive service outcomes (purportedly).

This direction of travel has had implications for social pedagogy, the professional positioning of which is shifting across Europe. In some of its traditional heartlands in Northern Europe it is under threat of being subsumed within social work. Its humanistic and particularist roots, within which knowledge is understood as emergent and contingent, are made to feel somewhat woolly when set against the promise of the ‘harder science’ imagined to be contained within the plethora of programmed interventions, often imported from the United States. The situation in the UK is rather different, where the context is one of social pedagogy attempting to establish itself as a professional orientation. In each scenario, whether to reassert or to assert itself, social pedagogy needs to be able to articulate a knowledge base that reflects how it goes about its business and the values underpinning this, as an academic discipline and as professional practice. This issue seeks to bring together contributions towards that end and hopefully to provoke further debate around the nature of social pedagogic knowledge.

We received a range of high-quality, international submissions, each developing a particular angle on everyday expertise. It might, on the surface, appear a bit ironic that many of the contributions to a volume on everyday knowledge are decidedly theoretical, but this is only proper. Social pedagogical practice is complex – messy and ambiguous. Attempts to ignore that complexity, to try to render practice as purely practical and amenable to programmed and procedural interventions, are doomed to failure. Managerial approaches, based upon a mantra of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, have not worked in the social professions – they have not even been economic, far less efficient or effective. Social services, certainly in the UK but almost certainly more generally, exist in a state of crisis, enjoying little political legitimacy and evincing a lack of self-belief. The roots of this crisis, according to [Longhofer and Floersch \(2012\)](#), are fundamentally epistemological, situated in theory-to-practice gaps that ‘are the source of social work’s continual knowledge crisis’ (p. 499). The articles in this issue all in their own way grapple with this theory-to-practice gap.

A key feature claimed for social pedagogical knowledge is the idea that it is contextual, that what is the right thing to do in any situation ‘depends’ on the particularities of that situation. This notion of

contingency is foregrounded in the first two articles in the issue. Mark Smith explores the Aristotelean idea of *phronesis* or practical wisdom that is enacted and in turn is refined and reshaped in the field of *praxis* as a counterpoint to more linear and abstracted theory-to-practice dynamics that have been and remain dominant in professional practice. Cecile Remy, picking up on growing interest in Activity Theory, uses this to illuminate dialectics between the particular and the universal in social pedagogical practice.

The next two articles explore the nature of relationships within social pedagogical practice. While the idea of relationship and relational or relationship-based practice has seen something of a resurgence in recent years, the nature of such relationships can be left somewhat unexplored. Sebastian and Angelika Monteux argue that these need to be understood as a series of encounters that incorporate spiritual care and a movement from dependence to interdependence. Adriane Schoone's study of pedagogues working with disaffected youth points to the phenomenological dimension of their connecting with them, in which pedagogical approaches draw from life experiences, cultural knowledge, vocational and relational skills and a passion to work with young people.

The following two articles explore the nature of social pedagogical practice. Lotte Junker Harbo and Robyn Kemp, writing from within an experiential research tradition across Denmark and England, engage with the tension identified above around the contradictions that become evident in seeking to employ programmatic interventions while holding to social pedagogical principles and ways of practising. Mie Engen, Line Sjøberg Bjerre and Mogens Jensen suggest that play therapy might offer a locus in which psychotherapy, often imagined to be practised in clinical contexts, can come together with everyday social pedagogical practice in residential care for children with severe emotional and behavioural problems.

The issue is bookended by a conceptual piece that synthesises much of Claire Cameron's work over the past decade. The article makes the case that knowledge grows out of everyday practice and that those involved in the direct care of children and young people ought to be considered to be experts in the everyday life contexts in which such work happens. This everyday expertise, nor the complexity of the task, is rarely explored or recognised.

We would like to thank the authors, the reviewers, journal editors and the editorial team at UCL for their support and forbearance in bringing this issue to fruition in trying times through the period of lockdown and restrictions and new working practices brought about as a result of responses to COVID-19. We believe we have brought together a compendium of articles that offer important insights into the nature of social pedagogical knowledge and practice that others might build upon. We hope you agree.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work.

Reference

Longhofer, J., & Floersch, J. (2012). The coming crisis in social work: Some thoughts on social work and science. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 22(5), 499–519. [[CrossRef](#)]