Virtual
virtues

Bidding to evolve the way student social workers learn and embed important practice experiences ahead of being thrown in at the deep end with real users of services, **Anne Llewellyn** and **Sarah Frame** outline a joint initiative between a technology developer and Leeds Metropolitan University, aimed at better preparing new social workers for life on the frontline.

Social work professionals across the UK engaged in safeguarding vulnerable children know all too well how complex and emotional the working environment can be. When failures become public, the media and other interested parties demand to know how and why any mistakes were made. In reality, there are dreadful outcomes that could never be avoided, even if everyone involved follows best practice and adheres to the latest guidance.

Yet, we know too that on some occasions more could, and should, have been done to intervene in the lives of vulnerable children. Evidence from a number of serious case reviews, for instance, continues to demonstrate that the lives of many vulnerable children could have been saved if the available guidance had been followed more effectively.

In retrospect, we can all often see where errors may have crept in. There can be flaws in the management of the team, failures in inter-agency communication and under-resourcing of services can play a significant role.

However, government spending on social services is unlikely to increase in the current economic climate, making it even more important that current and future social work professionals are empowered to attain the highest levels of competency – and that newly registered social work professionals are able to demonstrate competence as soon as they enter the workforce. The Laming Report (2009) and the Munro Report (2011) both highlighted the role of education in preparing graduate social workers to have the skills and knowledge to, as Munro put it, "make the best judgments they can to protect a vulnerable child".

There is plenty of guidance available to pre-registration and qualified social workers, and learning institutions across the UK do their utmost to ensure that students learn and understand this guidance and the theory that underpins social work. Yet, as in many professions, there is a gap between learning the theory and implementing that knowledge in very challenging and emotive real life scenarios. There is a strong case to be made, and the post-Baby Peter tragedy reports have suggested, that newly qualified social work professionals are just not very well prepared for the reality of the situations they may face, the decisions they may need to make and the way they may need to interact with other agencies.

Of course, much of this has been seen as the sort of learning experience that can only be gained on the job, so perhaps it should not be so concerning. That perception is changing, however. In 2010 the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) identified the need to improve the skills and expertise of social work graduates and the challenge of better linking theory and research into practice as two of the key areas for

improvement in social work degrees. In particular, the SWRB emphasised the importance of the actual process of learning – in effect saying that the way that social work is taught and learned is hugely influential in developing competent social work practitioners.

Historically, social work curricula have been largely content driven, governed by the external policies and bureaucratic goals set by government, professional organisations and universities. Curricula have been developed based on a competency-based model, designed to assess learning and levels of competency. To be better prepared for the transition into qualified practice, however, the curriculum also needs to focus on processes of learning. Student social workers must be empowered to use their critical judgement and analysis, so

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they can use evidence effectively.

This will help them to make the transition from novice practitioner to professional expert. Although there are relatively few UK studies exploring the use of experiential learning in social work education, Horwath and Thurlow (2004) evaluated the use of creative and authentic assessment strategies to engage students more effectively in the real world of social work practice. Experiential learning approaches acknowledge that learning by doing is an essential part of the learning process and can offer opportunities for real time decision-making using tools such as case study material, simulations and digital story telling.

However, there are a number of significant challenges that need to be overcome in order to deliver a compelling learning experience and provide social work students with concrete experiences of risk assessment and real time decision-making. In part, these challenges lie in the changing nature of higher education. Educators today must adapt to the widening participation agenda, the increased diversity of the student population and the increased demand for blended and flexible modes of delivery.

A summary of a learnscape

Learnscapes are described by their proponents as 'immersive learning environments'. They are aimed at engaging students with 'photorealistic', virtual situations that combine video interaction and real world examples. Real life characters guide students through an experience that includes learning content, assesses progress and provides remediation.
Contextually sensitive assessments are integrated into the storylines, in theory helping to preserve the student experience. Immersive learning offers students one means of bringing their learning to life away from the frontline. Planned by instructional designers to meet course objectives, the virtual environments aim to enable students to practise skills across a wide range of areas.

Course content needs to be updated to reflect changes in social work practice and students need to be guided to successfully navigate their own individual learning journey, which will continue for the duration of their professional career. This is a massive challenge for teaching and for the traditional classroom setting, which acts as a major constraint on bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Leeds Metropolitan University, though, was keen to ensure that the social work degree programme included a more flexible approach to learning. The university's social work department recognised that it needed to find a way to give the students that all important 'real life' experience of what it actually feels like to be a qualified social worker, dealing with a case where a child may be at risk. Equally, the department needed to ensure that the experience was consistent for all students, engaged their full attention and encouraged deeper learning.

It seemed obvious to use learning technologies to achieve this, but the team was aware that the simple scenarios available in traditional e-learning offered little in the way of added value. Instead, the university partnered with interactive learning provider Toolwire to develop a new Immersive Learning Environment, which enables social work students to develop real-life skills and experience. By combining online experiential learning technologies and expert content from the university's subject leaders, the partnership created Learnscape, a learning platform that attempts to replicate real social work practice in virtual locations.

Learnscape offers students an opportunity for real-life decision making by taking students through risk assessments and decisions about the child protection process. The programme uses both formative and summative assessment points for testing knowledge and understanding and providing feedback loops for remediation and further development. There are points of structured reflection for students to consider their own learning and development.

The focus needs to be on building a digital story that helps students achieve key learning outcomes. These outcomes are aligned with the development of knowledge and skills for child protection as advocated within the Munro report, including knowledge of child development and parenting capacity; the ability to make sense of observations and use them to make decisions for intervention; knowledge and understanding of legal and policy frameworks; and the importance of adopting a child-centred and multi-agency approach to child protection.

Indeed, the programme brings to life the government's guidance, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2010), by enabling students to interact with characters from different agencies – such as police and health providers – in addition to adopting the perspective of a social work professional.

The use of actors within the environment allows students to experience a range of emotional responses that are typically more associated with real-life situations than traditional classroom-based role-play. Newly qualified social workers can be particularly unprepared for their emotional response to challenging situations and Learnscape provides an opportunity for students to experience this in a safe environment.

Similar technology has proven to be highly successful in other subject areas in other higher education institutions. There is currently a lot of enthusiasm about the possible impact that it will have, not only to social work students, but also to experienced practitioners in social work and other related agencies.

The approach will be introduced as a module in the university's undergraduate social work degree course in September 2012. Going forward, Learnscapes for Social Work will be available for pre-registration and continuing professional development purposes at other institutions or for use in developing multi-agency work practices aligned with the Munro Report. **PSW**

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