

# **Experiential Learning and Innovations in Professional Education - Social Work Practice Laboratory**

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Thanks for giving me this opportunity to share with you the training of our social work students in our practice laboratory, which is based on the design of experiential learning model. First of all, for your background, I would start with the purpose of our social work training. The purpose of our social work education is to enable students to integrate knowledge, values and skill of the social work profession, to prepare themselves to become a practitioner or even a leader in the social service sector. In the curriculum structure, you can see that the Social Work Practice Lab in fact is a two-semester course, and it is a prerequisite course for students before they go to the field placement. It is an intensive training and lasts for one year. It serves to help students acquire the basic intervention skills like group work, case work and community work in our profession; to help students critically reflect on social work values; to enhance their self-awareness of being social workers, and to integrate theory with practice.

Our belief is that our students can learn best when working in real-life settings, and to have direct contact with the clients, which generate a greater sense of commitment and responsibility. We also believe that by participating in the design and implementation of the service project with guidance from teachers, and by reflecting on their performance, students can have their best learning outcome.

It is a two-semester course. Every week there is a whole-day training, lasting six hours. The whole class of students, normally about 40 students, are divided into four small groups. Each group works with a specific target group, like elderly, SEN children, family or women, and organizes their own

projects. The design of the course is mainly based on the experiential learning approach, as well as the problem-based learning approach.

In the first semester, focus is mainly on basic skill learning through in-house role play, case demonstrations, simulation group, etc. Students will have the opportunity to do agency and community study, to learn about the different services provided by the agency and to understand the community where the agency is located. Students learn to conduct need assessment for the target groups and design work proposals for their field projects. In the second semester, students will attach in the social service agency from January to April. In these four months, they will implement their field projects, which normally include a social work group and a community programme. Finally, they will do project evaluation with feedback from their clients and the agency staff.

The main feature of our Practice Lab is student-initiated learning. It is a small group teaching with ten to eleven students attached to a social service agency. They will have the opportunity to work with the agency staff from different disciplines, e.g. Social workers, occupational therapists, nurses, etc., with on-site teaching and supervision by teachers. They will have direct contact with the real clients, and with people in the community. We emphasize on peer learning too as students learn a lot from the mutual feedback of each other.

To demonstrate our work, I'd like to show you a student project in 2017 - "Walk in the Kwun Tong City", which was a project for the Christian Family Service Centre. The project aimed at promoting active and healthy ageing through encouraging walking in Kwun Tong City. According to the Active Ageing Framework of WHO (World Health Organization), elderly people, especially the young old, need more exercise and more walking. The problem is that there was a lack of opportunity to walk in the Kwun Tong city because of the crowded environment, the poor city plan, and the air pollution, etc. The solution that we came up with is to design a walking trail in Kwun Tong City so that elderly can walk along a route that is full of attractions with cultural historical sites, and also safe enough. It takes about 40 minutes for the elderly to walk from the city to the sea shore area. Here is a video produced by the students to show you the walking trail

and the positive feedback from elderly after walking. I'm sorry that we don't have the English subtitle because that is mainly for the Chinese elderly.

[Video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrEUb6zWDxw>]

At the beginning stage of the field project, students conducted a training group to equip elderly with the concept of active aging and the importance of walking to physical health. It is in the group that students collected opinions and ideas from the elderly members, and they designed together a walking trail that is suitable for elderly. Here is the map of the walking trail, with points of attractions. You can see that it is more than walking, as along the route, there were historical sites and good restaurants for elderly, and venues for leisure activities. The elderly group members were also empowered and trained to be tour guides to promote the walking trail. At the end of the project, students organized a one-day walking tour so elderly in the Kwun Tong District could join and try walking on it, while the trained group members acted as the tour guides. Finally, by producing the video, students wanted to promote the walking trail to more elderly people and motivate them to walk in the city.

The project idea was then enriched and replicated by the agency, Christian Family Service Centre (CFSC). It was awarded one of the Best Active Aging Programme in the 6th Eldercare Innovation Awards in Singapore last year.

To conclude, the social work practice laboratory course is mainly based on the four-phase Experiential Learning Cycle as suggested by David Kolb. You can see that in these two semesters, students are provided with an opportunity to have concrete experience, not just in agency visit and community study, but also the running of social work group, having direct contact with clients, and also promoting the walking trail. All these are very valuable experience for the students, and they reflect on these observations. For example, through the reflection, they understand more about the needs of the community and the needs of the elderly people, and then they identify the problem, that the poor environment in Kwun Tong area may be one obstacle for the elderly to walk. So they come up with the solutions of the walking trail. And through running the six-session groups as well as the community tour, students also have more reflection on, for example, group work

skill, about the group work process, about the strengths and limitations of the elderly people. All this time of experience and reflection are being assimilated into concept, like what is active aging, what the need of the elderly people in the aging process. And about empowerment, elderly have their strengths and assets, so how these assets are being utilized in our group work process, so that they can be empowered to become leaders, not just service users.

In the end, all these kinds of reflection and learning pave the way for students in their practicum as well as their future career as social workers. Thank you.

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