

Personal Learning Networks as a support for Transitioning MSc Social Work Students

Shona Robertson

Research question

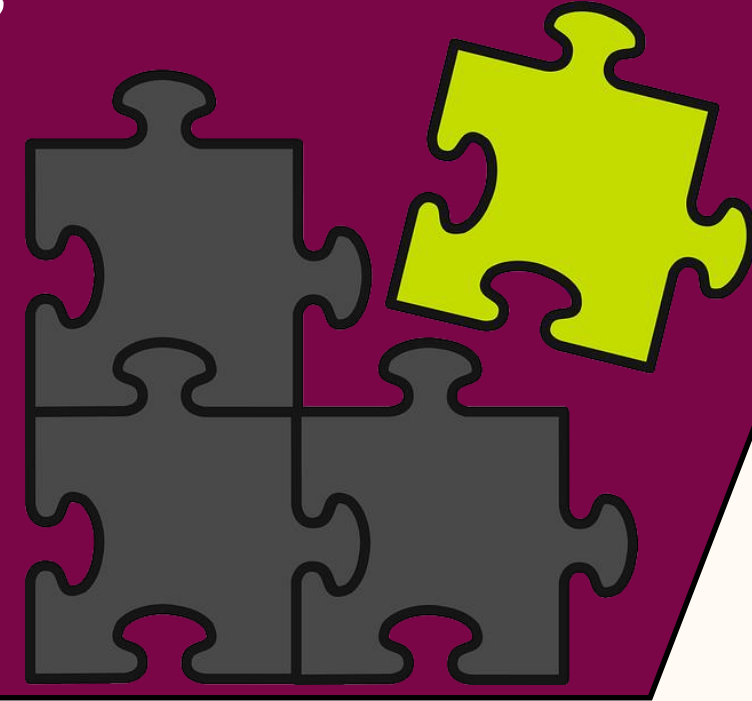
Do Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) support students in their transition from student to newly qualified Social Worker? PLNs are networks through which you can find and share information, knowledge and experience.

Introduction

This study reflects on the lessons learned from an evaluation of an online non-assessed module which was run for the first time in 2016 as part of a larger MSc Social Work module taken by 26 final year students. The online module was run jointly by the University of Dundee and Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) and introduced a range of social media tools to students as a means by which to build Personal Learning Networks (PLNs).

Literature

A review of newly qualified social workers (NQSWS) revealed that there remain gaps in a NQSW's skills and knowledge as they transition from student social worker into practice. Their findings, however, show that "[t]he majority of NQSW respondents value the process of continuing professional development to help fill knowledge and skill gaps." (Grant, Sheridan, & Webb, 2014, p 8)



Methodology

This study used a real world research (RWR) approach to consider the lessons learned from the initial introduction of this module. Robson, (2002, p. 27) suggests that in RWR "participants are viewed as helping to construct the reality with the researchers."

Based on the iterative nature of RWR, questionnaires were sent out following the running of the module. Students were asked about their reasons for minimal or non-engagement with the module.

RWR acknowledges the embedded nature of research, proposing that "human actions can only be understood in terms of their place within [...] social reality." (Robson, 2002, p.38). The study was interested in the students' views of the reality within which they experienced the module.

Findings

A short thematic analysis of the questionnaire feedback resulted in two key themes which were 'priorities' and 'time management'.

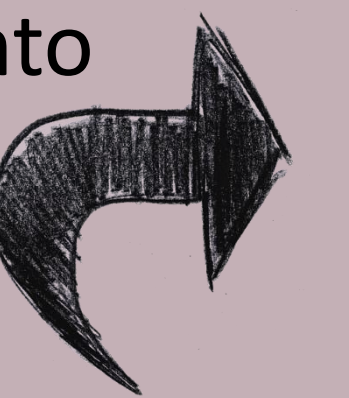
'I do feel that there is value in the module and would have been useful but as I have so much else on this fell to the bottom of the list.' Student A

*'I didn't engage with the online module as I my final placement with *** is really busy and it was an extra thing to think about on top of the ROA, consultation and CPD event.'* Student B

The initial findings, although tentative, suggest that students view PLNs as having some potential value in terms of developing their networks as they transition from academia into the world of work. Our challenge is to find a way to make this opportunity one which is delivered in a way which is manageable for our students, thereby giving us the opportunity to study the impact it has on their experience.

What next...

Rajagopal, Joostenten Brinkle & Sloep's (2010) literature review on personal learning networks suggest that there is a need to review the use of PLNs as social workers learn in practice through both experience and social interaction. They argue that a better understanding of the strategies used by social workers when developing PLNs is needed in order to suggest technologies which will support this. A follow-up study, with the module being run at a time more suitable to students, will investigate the perceived usefulness of PLNs to students transitioning from final year into the role of NQSW.



References

Grant, S. Sheridan, L & Webb, S.A. 2014. *Readiness for Practice of Newly Qualified Social Workers*. Retrieved 20th May 2017. https://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_115855-1.pdf

Rajagopal K., Joostenten Brinke D., & Sloep P. B. (2010) *Using personal professional networks for learning in social work: Need for insight into the real-world context*. In M. Wolpers, P. A. Kirschner, M. Scheffel, S. Lindstaedt, & V. Dimitrova (eds) *Sustaining TEL: From Innovation to Learning and Practice*. EC-TEL 2010. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, 6383, pp. 572-577. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-16020-2_56

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