

## **A human service learning community: at work in the Northern Territory**

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### **Abstract**

*The Northern Territory provides a diverse, vibrant and challenging human service practice environment. However the isolation of remote practice, entrenched social injustices, inadequate supervision and difficulty applying mainstream social work knowledge to an NT practice context are all factors which can negatively impact what should be a rewarding and fulfilling experience. This article discusses challenges to optimising the practice learning opportunities available in the NT. In addressing this topic we will reflect on taking a 'learning community' approach to human service education. This approach highlights the need to build relationships, identify and build on strengths, and work with communities to develop programs that are pedagogically sound and sustainable in the longer term within the NT. We provide examples of theoretical frameworks and processes that guide this approach in the hope of creating foundations for quality human service learning in the NT.*

**Keywords:** *Northern Territory, Learning Communities, Field Education, Workforce Issues*

### **Introduction**

Australian human services experience important challenges in being enacted in the Northern Territory. Given the focus of the various human service professions on social justice and working with disadvantaged populations to achieve positive social change, it is critical that human service agencies sustain an effective presence in the NT. The consequences of colonisation and historical forces that have shaped the NT have led to significant long-term social disadvantage for many people in the Territory, including the various Indigenous populations and residents in remote areas. It is a place where the gap between the economically wealthy and economically deprived appears to be growing ever wider. This has significant cultural and social implications.

The widespread inequalities that permeate the very fabric of Australia's Northern Territory are of obvious concern to community workers, welfare workers and social workers. Research conducted by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) in conjunction with Charles Darwin University (CDU) found that many social workers and social work students come from other states and territories to the NT for work or field education purposes (West, Heath & Ennis 2008). Additionally, anecdotal evidence indicates a noticeable transience within NT populations of community workers and welfare workers. In part, one would conclude that this is because each group perceives the NT, quite rightly, as a place of opportunity for the human services and for personal professional advancement, but also

because they recognise the devastating impact of structural and social inequality on human lives and want to contribute to a process of change. Whilst not discounting the previous efforts of human service professionals in the NT, the harsh reality is that real change has proven difficult and many major barriers to effective practice remain.

This complexity provides the context for this article and there are two important goals attached to the discussion. Firstly, the authors wish to assist students and practitioners thinking of coming to work in the Northern Territory by providing local knowledge that will facilitate their preparatory critical reflection process. This will be achieved by describing contemporary practice conditions and major issues in the NT, using field placement as a reference point. In many ways the challenges to good field placement experiences are barometric of broader challenges for human services in the NT.

The authors will articulate a 'learning community' approach to NT social work practice, which is developing and which is seen as a key strategy in raising the professional identity and quality of NT human service practice and education. As a lecturer, field educator and student each of the authors have personal experience of the benefits of embedding such an approach into NT practice. Through articulating the learning community approach led by CDU it is hoped that the wider Australian human service community will recognise its inherent opportunities and consider their potential contribution to their own work.

## **Overview of the human service landscape in the NT**

### ***Demographics***

The Northern Territory of Australia is a vast land geographically – encompassing territory from our tropical northern coastline to the dry red deserts of central Australia. Yet with a population of 218,000, Territorians represent only a small portion of Australians (ABS 2007). The main centres where people live and work in the NT are: Darwin, with a population of 106,000; Alice Springs with 23,800; Katherine with 16,500; Nhulunbuy with 13,900; and Tennant Creek with 3000 people. In addition there are many smaller communities and outstations across the NT with populations varying from the 'hundreds' down to just a handful of people.

The average age in the Territory is 30.6 years compared to the national average of 38. Indigenous people make up 29 percent of the NT's population, compared with 4 percent or less in all other states and territories (ABS 2007). With respect to socio-economic indicators like health, employment, income and education, overall NT figures generally compare reasonably well to the rest of Australia. Unfortunately though, strong NT wide figures mask the deeper inequities faced by the Indigenous population.

The ABS (2007) reports that Indigenous participation rates in NT schools generally decrease as the school level increased. In addition, whilst the NT has relatively low unemployment rates, these low rates are primarily driven by exceptionally small unemployment figures in the urban areas. Darwin, for example had a 2006 unemployment rate of 2.5%. Unemployment becomes far more problematic in remote and Indigenous populations (ABS 2007). With regard to income, Indigenous people in the NT have the lowest median

equivalised household income of Indigenous people in any Australian state or territory. Furthermore, at less than \$300 per week, this figure is less than half of the overall national median of \$618 per week. Finally, Indigenous people in the NT face significant health disadvantages with regard to both life expectancy and co-morbidity in relation to hospital episodes (AIHW 2008; ABS 2007).

The reasons for such serious inequality have been well documented in a range of major reports (NT Government 2007; Australian Government SCRGSP 2007), however policy and practice responses to these reports have, to date, failed to satisfactorily reduce the widespread social injustices felt by Indigenous people. Perhaps the most frequent criticism contained in the literature is that Indigenous people are insufficiently involved in decision making processes relating to policy and service provision. The 'learning community' approach to human service learning that will be discussed later in this paper can be seen as a direct response to such criticism, as it is founded on the human service ethics of working alongside disadvantaged people to promote social justice and enhanced capacity for self-determination.

### ***Human service workforce***

It should be noted that accurate workforce data on human service professionals in the NT, and in Australia more broadly, is difficult to obtain and interpret. This is largely due to issues such as ambiguous job titles combined with self reporting procedures (McCormack 2001; McDonald & Jones 2000). As an example, social workers in the NT are involved in a wide range of activities typically placed under the umbrella of 'social work'. Indeed, NT research conducted by West, Heath, Ennis (2008) found over 30 different job titles (in a sample of 49 workers) under which social workers were employed with only 3 specific titles having the words 'social work' in them.

Whilst, this research helped close some of the gaps in this area, it also starkly illustrated the need for more comprehensive further research focusing on community workers, welfare workers and social workers who are not AASW members. In terms of the current paper, this deficiency in research places limits on the provision of a comprehensive overview of the human service workforce in the NT.

In light of the above, the information that follows is based on the small amount of local research and then a local understanding, made possible by the relatively small population and comparatively visible nature of NT human service practitioners. There are currently approximately 100 AASW members in the NT however there is a general awareness of a significant cohort of additional social workers in the NT. The majority of human service professionals are located in the major centres listed earlier, yet there are also at different times workers located in the smaller centres and remote communities. These populations tend to be quite transient and/or utilised on a 'fly in - fly out' basis.

Major employers of human service professionals in the NT are the Australian Government, NT Government, Charles Darwin University, the not-for-profit sector and a small group of private practitioners. Whilst this organisational spread would be similar to that throughout Australia, the NT is very much a place of 'frontier' human service work. NT practice encompasses all the rewards and challenges of working with remote populations, working

alongside people from a broad range of backgrounds - including a large Indigenous population - often with very different cultural understandings and diverse world-views. Like other places, major fields of practice include health and mental health, alcohol and other drugs, child protection, employment, aged and disability services and defence.

'Big issues' are often experienced by human service practitioners in a personal way in the NT. For example, when something like the Federal government intervention into Indigenous communities hits the headlines as it did in 2007, human service workers in the NT found themselves 'on the ground' dealing with the often puzzling day-to-day realities of what such policy means and thinking through the ethics and values bound up with these policies.

Similarly, Darwin's large East Timorese population, and the city's close ties with East Timor over many decades, mean some workers have experienced that country's development in a personal way. As in other parts of Australia, human service workers also work with significant refugee populations particularly from a range of African countries. As a response to these regional conditions, in 2008 CDU commenced enrolling students in Australia's first undergraduate humanitarian studies degree – the Bachelor of Humanitarian and Community Studies – accredited by the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW) and supported by Red Cross and Medicins Sans Frontières (MSF).

## **Major issues in NT practice**

Embedded in the above context are a number of distinct practice issues which impact directly on practitioners and students completing field placement. The practice issues listed below were mainly identified in research conducted with 49 Northern Territory social workers in late 2007 (West et al 2008).

### ***Transient workforce and population***

Each year there is a significant population turnover in the NT (ABS 2007). In part this is due to the prevalence of short term (3 years or less) contracts at all levels of government. The NT also hosts significant defence force populations across Army, Navy and Air Force, in addition to the United States facility at Pine Gap near Alice Springs. The cost of living is also a major factor influencing people's ability to stay in the NT with house prices particularly becoming increasingly prohibitive. For the human service sector this translates into difficulty achieving continuity of services, relationship and network building confusion, loss of practitioners who have NT knowledge and experience, and a general lack of 'shared history' in the workforce.

### ***Servicing of remote populations***

Working with people in far-flung, under-resourced and frequently inaccessible communities is a serious challenge for service providers. Many agencies are struggling to deliver services to remote populations and have not traditionally been assisted by social policy formulated centrally by decision-makers outside the NT. Such policy frequently fails to adequately address the unique considerations attached to remote practice (Cheers 1998). For individual practitioners, not being able to provide adequate support is disappointing and disheartening when there are communities, families and individuals asking for a range of human services.

This creates obvious ethical tensions and raises questions about how the human service sector can effectively respond.

### ***Workforce shortages***

The NT has major workforce shortage issues across virtually all sectors, perhaps due to the two previous issues discussed in this section. There is a lack of skilled and qualified workers available to social and community service agencies. Policy, research and academic positions also have a similarly limited pool of practitioners. Increasing the skill levels of existing practitioners is a significant task. For instance, many positions that have a co-ordinating or supervisory role – positions that in other places would require at least a Bachelor degree in welfare studies or social work go unfilled for significant amounts of time or are filled by people without such qualifications. The prevailing ability of practitioners without these qualifications to successfully obtain such positions would seem to decrease their motivation to continue with further study. Overall, these issues add stress in terms of workload and supervision for the workers involved, correspondingly placing the quality of service at risk. While this situation exists in other places, in the NT it directly impacts on almost every agency and practitioner on a daily basis.

### ***Supervision***

In the context of field education, supervision is essential, but further than that, the values of the human service professions in general are at risk of erosion if high quality mechanisms for supervision are not entrenched in everyday practice. Using social work as an example, West et al's (2008) study identified that access to supervision in its many permutations is a major concern for NT social workers.

Formal social work supervision was recognised as being absent from many organisations. Though informal supervision can partially help alleviate this, practitioners outside of Darwin are at risk of reduced access because the majority of professional development events have traditionally been held in Darwin. Given the dense professional networks and community oriented nature of practice in the NT, human service workers tend to embrace opportunities for informal supervision and collegial discussion with other people facing similar practice challenges. Professional development activities are a key mechanism for this, so supporting workers across the NT to access them is vital.

It is also recognised that good supervision requires the informed use of theoretical frameworks and models (Cleak & Wilson 2007; Wilson 2000). Given resource constraints and social work staff shortages in many organisations, there is an identified need to ensure that adequate training and ongoing learning is offered to people who have a supervisory role – whether this be as a field educator or supervisor of practicing workers.

One final issue relating to supervision in the Northern Territory is the supervision of human service workers in management or co-ordinating roles in organisations. As discussed previously, workforce shortages in the NT mean that many workers can advance their career far more expeditiously than in other regions. As a consequence it is not uncommon for recent graduates to be filling senior roles in organisations. It is therefore imperative that practitioners in these often stressful positions have access to formal supervision and that

professional associations more broadly be conscious of the potentially detrimental impact of having inexperienced workers in senior positions.

### ***Government employment***

Over two-thirds of the social workers in West et al's (2008) study indicated that they worked directly for government. When combined with the knowledge that NT human service workers are typically identifiable by their job title rather than their qualifications, this raises serious ethical concerns. For example, at the NT Social Work Day in 2008, the focus was on the intervention into Indigenous communities and throughout the day social workers provided descriptions of how individual policies under this broader response fit and do not fit with the values and ethics of social work. With so much confusion about which practitioners with which skills are practising in which positions it is extremely difficult for the professional associations to influence government practice to 'fit' with a specific ethical position. This is because each position may at various times be filled with a practitioner whose code of ethics and practice standards are vastly different to a previous worker from a different profession.

In addition, the major problem attached to the prevalence of social workers practising in government organisations is the raft of constraints placed on them regarding disseminating information about their practice experiences. Whilst this is not a unique problem to the NT, under the current socio-political conditions it provides a significant barrier to developing a co-ordinated 'human service' voice for improved social justice outcomes. As the major university in the region, a major shortfall is recognised in the production and dissemination of human service knowledge about the Northern Territory. The only real solution is increased contribution from more practitioners and whilst they work for government in the current political milieu, means of addressing the lack of 'voice' in the media and other public forums need to be found. It is also about Northern Territory practitioners linking with their profession nationally to provide information about current policy and practice in the NT.

### **Implications for field education**

There are flow-on issues in terms of student placement. Often students are offered positions during their placements. If this happens in a third year social work placement there is an impact on the student's completion of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW). In addition, agencies may place additional workload and responsibility on students as a result of staff shortages. Conversely agencies may not offer enough learning opportunities because they find it easier to do the work themselves or are too busy to properly identify learning goals and tasks with the student. Moreover, the number of placements available may be restricted due to agencies simply not having qualified staff available to provide supervision.

These issues are applicable to most regions in Australia, however they are magnified in the NT – due a range of 'extremities' - extreme remoteness, extreme climate, and high populations of extremely disadvantaged people. Wider shortages of skilled human service workers are unlikely to be addressed without a significant drive from the professional associations and the Australian government to attract students. Nonetheless, CDU is developing an approach to social work and welfare education that is seen as the optimal way to counter some of the problems described above. This 'learning community' approach has

clear benefits for local students, practitioners and agencies and generates the impetus for them to connect within the NT human service community.

## **The learning community approach and experiences**

### ***The learning community framework – theoretical foundations***

Since the professional community in the NT is not large enough to sustain a separate approach to practice and education, the best way to meet the multiple needs of students, agencies and practitioners was seen to be to join together to develop a learning community that conceptualises human service work in the NT as a holistic venture from training through to advanced practice and research.

This idea of a social work learning community comes from two main theoretical frameworks: lifelong learning and community work. The concept of ‘lifelong learning’, although often considered as a political buzzword, has much to offer in relation to how one approaches and understands learning and the various professional values and skills that students need to develop.

In considering the key themes in dialogues on lifelong learning, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 1996) identified some common elements in the range of definitions that are being used worldwide. These elements include a belief in the intrinsic value of learning, the desire for universal access to learning opportunities, recognition of the importance of non-formal learning, consideration and promotion of personal qualities and characteristics that are needed for learning “including the motivation and capacity to engage in self-managed, independent learning” (OECD 1996:89). The International Academy of Education Task Force (Tuijnman 1999:6) acknowledges such commonalities and states that “(l)ifelong learning generally defines a broad set of beliefs, aims and strategies around the central tenet that learning opportunities available over the whole lifespan and accessible on a widespread basis should be key attributes of modern societies”.

Jacques Delors (1996) states that there are four pillars of lifelong learning which in turn have helped to shape the various definitions by providing a basis for commonalities. These pillars are very relevant to the development of the human service learning community. The first pillar of lifelong learning is that of *learning to live together* where knowledge and learning are seen to contribute to understanding and tolerance within society. For human services this places a focus on cultural competency, social justice and collaboration. The second pillar, *learning to know*, draws attention to the foundations of learning which contribute to the ability to build on such knowledge across the life course. Translating this pillar, the emphasis is placed on professional development and sharing. The third pillar, *learning to do*, is related to competencies for a variety of situations including work and living. For human services this relates to a variety of social work skills but with particular emphasis on generating knowledge and research about social work in the NT. *Learning to be*, the fourth pillar, relates to the individual’s personal responsibility for attaining their goals. It highlights the need to be aware of personal resources such as knowledge, experience and communication.

These four pillars are useful for considering lifelong learning in relation to the individual however they are essentially focused on the person as an individual. Little attention is paid to the structural factors which impact on each of the four pillars. Acknowledgement of the structural level that influences knowledge systems, undermines individual strengths and limits the power of the individual is vital. Systems theory (Hearn 1969), a political economy perspective (Hasenfeld 1992) and an empowerment perspective (Lee 2001) have much to offer in creating a balance between the individual and the environment. This highlights the responsibility for contributing to and nurturing the learning community as being shared by CDU, agencies, practitioners and students.

While the lifelong learning dialogue is focused on the individual, the idea of building a learning culture underpins and provides the value base for the concept of lifelong learning and illustrates the changed role of stakeholders in the process. The National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (NAGCELL) (Fryer 1999) advocate three framework conditions for building learning cultures: 1. all institutions which provide learning need to review cultures and current ways of working; 2. employers needs to invest in employees education; and, 3. public bodies should examine how best to stimulate and support lifelong learning by redirecting and rebalancing resources.

These conditions begin to acknowledge the inequities present in the social structure and the need to address these. However, the NAGCELL still contends that individuals must take responsibility for their own learning and states that many people are locked into a culture which regards lifelong learning as unnecessary, unappealing, uninteresting or unavailable. Yet if we take a person-in environment framework, it is the interaction between the structural elements and the individual that needs to be highlighted. In working on both sides of the equation CDU hopes to generate some real change. It is by taking a community work approach that we have gone about building the learning community.

The concept of a learning community appeared to fit with the needs of the key stakeholders. Through a series of workshops, consultation sessions and focus groups particular challenges were identified including: the need for graduates who could cope with the complexity of issues faced in practice, the need for ongoing professional support and education and locally developed research as well as a keen enthusiasm for being involved with the education of future practitioners. Working with the variety of stakeholders to find solutions to local needs has been embedded in the development of the learning community model.

### ***What does it look like?***

The previously discussed reality that there are many complex social problems in the NT for which there are no clear answers indicates that students need to be prepared to commit to dialogue to explore innovative ways to tackle issues in the longer term. A problem-based approach was therefore deemed appropriate in which it is emphasised that the lecturer, or indeed the practitioner, does not necessarily have an 'answer' and problems need to be explored in a collaborative manner. Engaging with students across year levels to challenge cultural assumptions about human service work is serving a dual purpose of increasing the number of Indigenous students and ensuring our students are culturally competent

practitioners. Indigenous student numbers have increased to over 10% in both our programs compared to an average of 4% in the higher education sector of CDU.

Pedagogically, this translates into courses based around a holistic learning community in which the teaching/practice/research nexus is a central feature. Authentic learning and assessment activities are embedded into the curriculum to allow students to work on 'real world' problems relevant to the NT context in a supervised and supported environment. In this way the programs model good human service practice, provide opportunities for mentoring (practitioners/students, educators/practitioners, earlier and later year students), build professional networks, help agencies and practitioners contribute to and take an evidence-based approach, and stimulate considerable discussion in industry around research and publication and postgraduate study. By having practitioners and agencies invested in and contributing to the programs, the programs' sustainability is also increased because there is a greater likelihood of experienced practitioners undertaking postgraduate study to provide a pool of local qualified future educators.

Authentic learning and assessment activities have been embedded into the curriculum of a range of units, but are best illustrated by the following two: *Working with and Developing Communities* and *Social Work Research Methods*.

As a core component of the community work unit, students enter the competitive international program Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) which is based on social entrepreneurialism. Using SIFE guidelines, they work in groups on a community-based project and present their work at the National SIFE forum. As such, they work for the benefit of the community which is part of social work practice. They also write a grant application for a community-based organisation in the NT which is then given to the organisation to submit.

The second example is from our research methods class. Approaches to teaching research methods across many disciplines usually entail students preparing a literature review and research proposal on a topic of either their choosing or the lecturer's interest. Students put in a lot of work and come up with great projects that are not carried out. CDU's curriculum design is different because it utilises the teaching/practice/research nexus and engages students in tackling real issues from theory through to practice. Early in the year, agencies are asked to provide research ideas from the field. A list is then compiled of approximately ten projects that allow the students plenty of scope for development. Representatives from agencies provide the students with the context of the problem. Students each choose one of the projects as their focus for the semester and all content and assessment tasks are centred on the application of research theory to the project. Agencies are invited back at the end of semester and students present their research proposals.

After assessment, some proposals are developed into student field education placements to be carried out in the agency in the following semester. Through this integrated approach, students further evaluate their proposals in light of the reality of carrying out the research as part of their placement. This means they gain valuable experience in research while also

undertaking their field education component. Agencies also make real gains with valuable research being carried out and are more likely to take a student on placement.

### **One student's experience**

Underpinned by the learning community approach one of the authors (DH) carried out a research project with the AASW as a third year placement – a fantastic experience from which significant benefits for students were observed.

Usually for the first time as a social, welfare or humanitarian worker, students are able to conduct a research project from conception to completion. Further enhancing the experience is the process of connecting theory with practice by using assessable pieces of work in real practice. One of the most frustrating aspects of being a student is producing good pieces of work which go no further than being assessed. In addition, this placement led to involvement in a number of other social work research projects. As more students take up similar opportunities and become interested in research the net effect is a burgeoning social work research group at CDU. Given previous discussion this is a critical development in addressing the need to produce and disseminate locally relevant research.

Connecting with the AASW to conduct the project offered the professional benefits of assisting in the development of significant networks of social workers, participating in branch activities and presenting the findings of the study at an AASW planning day. In this way the project provided a source of mutual learning for the AASW, the field educator and the student. Working in collaboration with a branch that largely functions via the efforts of volunteers meant that a project that otherwise would not have been possible was able to be carried out.

In line with the learning community approach, perhaps the most significant gain was involvement in a project that allowed social workers in organisations to participate in a project as social workers and not strictly in their agency role. One of the key challenges for human services in the future is to maintain the values and ethics that bond the professions, so providing practitioners with critical mechanisms for reinforcing their professional identity. In this light, the defining feature of the placement was being able to carry it out with an awareness of the theoretical framework of the learning community. Rather than just envision the research project as an isolated activity, this framework helped the student to recognise the broader contribution being made to human services in the NT.

### **Conclusion**

The development of a learning community that incorporates students, agencies, and in this case, the AASW has generated positive student, staff and agency outcomes as well as making a significant contribution to the NT community. Agencies have been enthusiastic about participating in authentic learning with many suggestions for research and projects. They welcome the opportunity to have students prepare research proposals and grant applications and then carry out projects in their agencies. This has increased the number of placements that have been offered to CDU students.

The flow on from this has been an amplified amount of research being carried out as a part of placement and in partnership with agencies. Several agencies have initiated discussions about a range of research needs including project partnerships, consultancies and post-graduate study for practitioners. As discussed previously, supervision is a major issue in the Northern Territory and this framework is informing a project that focuses on improving access to quality supervision.

From a student point of view, the feedback on the units has been very good, with comments focusing on the value of working on authentic projects within classroom-based academic units. This has been reflected in student evaluations of learning and teaching which show very positive feedback for both courses. Enrolment numbers have increased and Course Experience Questionnaire scores have gone from well below the national average to well above.

The purposeful bringing together of human service students, practitioners (both new and experienced), and academics from CDU in a framework of lifelong learning *is* community development. At a time where practice conditions, and indeed, the human service professions themselves are changing quickly, the development of such a community is vital in the NT. It is vital in terms of ongoing learning as the learning community offers a mechanism by which people involved can research, debate, challenge and shape their own professions. In terms of the wider community, Indigenous people in the Northern Territory face widespread social inequality and a number of reports implore governments, other policy makers and service providers to involve Indigenous people in decision making processes that affect them. Whilst the human service learning community is still developing, it is founded on the premise of fostering mutual education between practitioners, academics, human service agencies, community members and students.

Strong and supportive networks are the very basis of any community. The networks formed between students, practitioners and CDU academics bring potential rewards to all people in that network. Students have access to practitioners experience and support. Practitioners gain access to the enthusiasm and insight offered by students. In turn many practitioners and their organisations are establishing greater links with their local university, through which they may be inspired to access post-graduate study, research and supervision opportunities. The University is working hand in hand with social work and welfare practitioners, thus keeping abreast of practice and workforce issues.

Ultimately, however, the hope for a strong human service learning community is the best possible human services for the people that access them, the people of the Northern Territory.

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