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New technologies and creative practices in teaching groupwork

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Abstract: *This paper introduces the use of new technologies and creative practices in teaching groupwork within two applied Irish postgraduate MA courses (Social Work and Community Development). By reflecting on experiences of teaching groupwork through the use of visual biographies, mask making, aural and video podcasting, the authors argue that creative teaching works to integrate experiential, practical and theoretical knowledge of groupwork. A more widespread adoption and evaluation of creative technologies in teaching groupwork to enhance student learning and affirm professional competencies is proposed.*

Keywords: *social work; community development; creative technologies; podcasting; mask-making; visual biographies; group work; groupwork*

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Groupwork pedagogy in an Irish context

Professional standards in Community Work and Social Work recognise groupwork theory, knowledge and skills as essential criteria for practice (AIEB, 2016, p.10; CORU, 2013, p.30). What then is the foundation on which groupwork knowledge is built? In relation to community development, the skilful deployment of facilitation and committee skills and having an understanding of partnership and collaboration are regarded as core competencies. The qualities of the accomplished and competent worker include integrity, empathy, discretion, openness, flexibility, dependability, sensitivity and a respectful demeanour (AIEB, 2016, p.10, 13, 16, 19, 23). The 'All Ireland Standards in Community Work' aimed at community work practitioners, educators, project and programme managers, are also helpful for those involved in the training and education of groupworkers and are a first step towards a collective conversation on pedagogy. There are also a number of scholarly publications on community development in the Irish context (see Crickley and McArdle, 2009), but references to specific components of teaching and training in community work/development education are rare. In contrast, significant scholarly texts and journal publications on the history of the profession and teaching and learning in Irish social work education are more developed (see Kearney, 2005; Skehill, 2010). Similarly, the 'Criteria and Standards of Proficiency Education and Training Programmes in Social Work' set out core values and qualities for the profession, contained in six domains of professional ability (CORU, 2013, p.18-31). There is greater attention paid to groupwork pedagogies in international social work education and this is an important field for future research and publications in Ireland (see McGovern, 2016).

The primary task of structured groupwork modules in higher education community development and social work courses is to educate and train groupworkers to lead, facilitate and enable group members to work together towards constructive outcomes and optimum working experiences. Groupwork modules aspire to impart basic theoretical knowledge to students of group dynamics, models of group development, engagement with and experience of leadership and membership issues. For students, groupwork can be a new method of collective and experiential learning that is distinctive from a more

individually focussed orientation. The groupwork modules discussed in this article, actively re-orient students towards the primary experience of 'the group itself', not only as the departure point for individual and collective learning, but as a distinctive conceptual and analytical entity that merits attention (Taylor, 2016). Two postgraduate programmes in which groupwork is taught as stand alone modules are under consideration here (MA in Community Development, MA in Social Work). Both groupwork modules share a conceptual framing that values autonomy, flexibility, diversity and collaboration; that seeks balance between didactic and experiential learning; that fosters real world applications and develops a shared approach that inspires both students and educators to become deeply engaged in learning and teaching. Keim, Goodrich, Ishii and Olguin (2013) suggest that the use of experiential groups is a viable alternate pedagogical approach to groupwork teaching. Practice and training in creative thinking, use of imagination and intuitive ability is advised by Benson (2008). His model of creative groupwork, is grounded in theory ('science'), but is also based on aesthetic and affective judgements while having a clear belief in and vision of possibility in the group ('art' and 'faith' p. 156).

Critical reviews or reflections on teaching groupwork in the Irish higher education context are rare, prompting us to document and describe our approach and practice to groupwork education. A search of the literature has yielded few results on groupwork pedagogy in Ireland. The closest Irish literature, for example, concerns an evaluation of a programme to train facilitators to provide personal development courses for women in the 1990s as part of local development initiatives and programmes (Clarke, 1992) and an academic analysis of effectiveness of empowerment and personal development training for women's involvement in the political process (O'Donovan and Ward, 1999). Similarly publications can be found on deploying small group teaching in the primary school classroom (Phelan, 2011), on vocational training and adult education policy and practice (Garavan, Costine, Heraty, 1997; Inglis, 1994) and on the learning impact of group projects in the undergraduate classroom (Fawcett and Lavery, 1988). The authors propose that there is a greater potential for the deployment of creative teaching methodologies in groupwork courses than currently recognised or practised in Ireland. Inspired by the values and ideals of creative groupwork, the authors recognise the challenges

and opportunities presented by new technologies in teaching/learning (Benson, 2008). Engaging with creative practices and new technologies is an opportunity to practise creative groupwork and promote inclusive learning in community development and social work education, we argue.

The international dimension: teaching and doing

International professional associations of groupworkers have brought attention to training and education through the publication of standards for teaching and practice (see for example the publications of the *Association for Specialists in Group Work*, *The International Association for Social Work with Groups*, or *Community Worker Ireland*). Ward (2004) notes that prior to the mid 1970s, US based groupwork training in counselling, was experimental, intuitive and experiential, valuing insight-based learning from experience over academic learning (p. 2). Interested in the evolution of groupwork as a professional practice, Conyne and Bemak (2004) argue for a change in the training, inspired by the human growth movement of the 1960s, to training that is grounded in knowledge and responsive to contemporary social and political issues and needs. The teaching of groupwork has undergone a transformation since the 1970s with increased emphasis on content ‘...in conjunction with experiential activity...to help student members achieve integration of cognitive and affective understanding from their courses in groupwork and from their group participation experience’ (Ward, 2004, p.2).

The scarcity of discussion on how to teach groupwork prompted Berger (1996) to review an integrated model based on didactic teaching, observation and two strands of the experiential component – participation and leadership. The didactic model is subject-centered and allows the groupwork educator to structure and monitor the learning environment in close correspondence with student interest, ability and educational need (p. 81). The emphasis is on ‘talking about’ groupwork rather than direct experience, which is provided by supervised observation of a real-life group. Directly witnessing group processes and interventions is an advantage of an experiential methodology. Experiential participation is a student-centered alternative in which theoretical and skills based

learning comes from observing and influencing small group processes while being a member or leader of the group. There are however, a variety of ethical, educational and organisational drawbacks considered within the research. Berger concludes that teachers have to experiment with methodologies, taking into account class size, composition, student learning styles, duration of the course, availability of groups for observation and educational philosophy and mission of the educators and institutions (p.88). In a teaching methodologies and content review of US based groupwork syllabi in graduate social work programmes from the late 1990s, Strozier (1997) found that both didactic and experiential teaching methodologies were in use, combining traditional classroom discussion and lecturing with small group exercises, role play and journaling. In Strozier's study a didactic methodology is taken to mean '...lectures, classroom discussion, papers and tests', compared to an experiential approach seen as '...in-class tasks such as, process-support groups, and role-playing in class' (p.68). Experiential groups were more typically task rather than process or support oriented. In relation to groupwork course content compared to Euster's study in the late 1970s, Strozier reports an increase in experiential groups, but on reviewing a number of University programmes found only one course made reference to 'creative teaching methodologies'. In the course reviewed, content varied with a commonality around; types of groups, developmental stages and leadership issues. Strozier noted the poor representation of attention to values, ethics, diversity and oppression (Strozier, 1997). Supporting this view Riva and Korinek (2004) agreed that the essential components of groupwork teaching include academic content, observation and experiential opportunities in the context of supervision. It is interesting, they argue, that while much has been written about the experiential component, the academic component is little examined.

Creativity and groupwork

Identifying a new 'creative class', Florida's (2002, 2005) arguments link creativity, technological innovation and economic prosperity, thus challenging educational institutions to consider how best to encourage creativity in students. Promoting the creative groupwork

leader, Rinkevich (2011) in a review of creative teaching, identifies the characteristics of creative educators as those who possess autonomy, are persistent, self-confident, have a sense of humour and adaptability and show themselves as risk takers who have control of the curriculum (p. 220). Citing Ivcevic's (2007) work on different types of creativity, creative teaching is understood by Rinkevich as a process of 'everyday' creativity concerning personal growth and problem solving skills, as distinct from the mystery associated with 'artistic' creativity. Creative teaching strategies include making connections between course work and real life, giving examples of creative practices, evaluating original student input to activities and encouraging students to 'be creative' (p. 222). Creative teaching, Rinkevich argues, is demanding, requiring much planning, preparation and resourcing but empirical studies show that students are more engaged, their learning and cognitive development is supported, providing a sense of achievement, which is a predictor of academic success (p. 219).

What are the benefits of using creative technologies within groupwork teaching? Advising caution in embracing technological tools, Bowman and Bowman (1998) recognise the paradigm shift for groupwork professionals provoked by advances in technology that represent both threat and opportunity to groupwork communities. Web-based counselling services, the rapid provision of on-line information and immediate access to self-help groups are widely available, facilitated by internet technology. Internet technology opens up the possibility of on-line communication, community and relationships among a diversity of peoples, contacts which were not possible in the pre-wired world of the 1970s. Electronic and on-line communication and interaction is for most an everyday practice; while urging groupworkers to become technologically proficient, Bowman and Bowman argue that 'real' encounters involve human contact with community. In their examination of on-line social work classes, Simon, Cohen, McLaughlin, Muskat and White (2015) alert educators to the potential of combined asynchronous *and* synchronous online groupwork courses for social work education. They argue that 'community building is at the core of social groupwork' (p. 59) and that the challenges and opportunities that exist in online teaching are similar to face to face teaching. We argue that the application of technology to groupwork teaching presents itself as a modern, forward thinking utility when

integrated with reliable, proven educational approaches. In addition to acquiring technical competencies and an increased awareness of the use of new media in social and professional settings, the literature on the benefits of podcasting in education, for example, notes increased motivation among students to write, improved fluency and listening skills (Dale, 2007). In contemplating the idea of moving from a teacher-centred pedagogy to a more student-centred pedagogy, Gibson (2010) considers the implications of creative teaching for making this seamless transformation. He notes the importance of an educative environment that provides ‘... adequate time for creative thinking; rewarding creative ideas, thoughts and products, encouraging risk-taking; allowing mistakes...and thinking about the thinking process’ (p. 610). ‘This, he argues, is important for society’s potential future leaders, thinkers and innovators.’

Using podcasting as an adjunct to teaching and assessment methods in higher education has had some exposure (Jarvis and Dickie, 2010; Evans, 2008; Cambell, 2005; Chester et al, 2011; Lazzari, 2009; Rahimi and Asadollahi, 2011). A sample of recent studies demonstrates the use of podcasting in Nursing (Strickland, Gray and Hill, 2012; Kemp, Myers, Campbell and Pratt, 2010), Geography (Hill and Nelson, 2011) and Music and Language education (Tam, 2012). In the following studies podcasting has been used specifically to supplement traditional learning (Van Zanten, Somogyi, and Curro, 2012; O’Bannon, Lubke, Beard and Britt, 2011; Mikkelson, and Devidson, 2011). Furthermore, Cartney (2013) suggests that the relevance of podcasting, in particular for lecture material, may have some benefit, but that the broader context of social work education and personal contact must not be belittled or ignored. In the rush to adopt new methods, Waldman and Rafferty (2008) strike a cautionary note to social work educators not to become over enthused and to comprehensively evaluate the use of any technological techniques used in teaching professional social work practice. A comprehensive evaluation of the use of communication technologies in teaching professional social work practice is advised. Westwood (2014) advances the case for the use of social media in social work education, arguing that if services are delivered online, educators and students must be informed and attentive to ‘potential difficulties or values issues which using social media presents’ (p. 4).

Teaching groupwork to community development and social work students

Providing students with the opportunity to observe and comment on group membership, processes and interactions are goals of both groupwork modules in the MA Social Work and MA Community Development programmes at the National University of Ireland, Galway. To develop these competencies and skills it was understood that students needed the opportunity to work in, alongside or with a group. Institutional supports and resources for the supervision of students doing groupwork are limited. Both modules discussed here utilised the class group as a 'working' group and an 'experiential' group. Though challenging in terms of boundaries, holding and levels of comfort for students, this model provided a secure structure for observing group dynamics, membership and leadership interactions while developing groupwork skills and competencies. Due to longer time allocation, the Community Development groupwork programme had more opportunity to combine experiential and didactic modes of teaching and learning in course design and delivery. Nonetheless common to both sets of students was a willingness to explore and be engaged in a new way of acquiring knowledge and skills by being innovative, experimental and working collectively.

The conceptual framework from which the Community Development groupwork module evolved reflects a sociological and group relations perspective that focuses on the interconnections between history, biography and social structure. This is expressed through individual and group communication, social relationships and interactions, identities and values (Mead, 1930; Bion, 1948; Mills, 1959). The course itself provides specialist knowledge and skills training for change oriented, community-based, collective action development work. The educators' experiences in working with women's groups on educational and anti-poverty issues, bringing feminist, transformatory and emancipatory perspectives that support individual and group empowerment to the work also informs this framework (see for example Butler and Wintra, 1991; Daly, 1989; Pollio, 2000; Prendiville, 1995).

The MA in Community Development is a full-time, two-year, taught postgraduate course of sixteen modules combined with a work placement and a minor dissertation, to which 12-14 students are

typically accepted. Students are attracted to this programme primarily due to the community development ethos and social change orientation. The placement experience in statutory, community and voluntary organisations typically involves working with and leading groups. The Groupwork module is taught in Year 1 and Year 2 of the course, with 30 class based hours per semester plus additional one-to-one support hours. Turning to the challenges of including and capturing experiential work for end of course assessment portfolios, examples of using paint and paper based creative technologies – specifically visual biographies and mask making exercises are incorporated. Visual biographies are deployed at inclusion and separation stages of the group process while mask making is used to raise awareness about professional identities and practice concerns for new community development practitioners. These are included as examples of creative technologies that not only add an experiential dimension to groupwork teaching and learning but develops a sensibility around the benefits of working collectively in groups. The aesthetic and theoretical basis of groupwork are brought into conversation through these technologies, and in so doing bring a renewed pleasure to teaching and learning.

Towards the last hour of the first class, students are invited to paint, draw, illustrate or compose a visual biography based on their personal and educational journey throughout the MA programme. Inspired by ‘the pieces of me’ series in which people in the public eye talk about the significance of their favourite possessions to illustrate their careers, our visual biographies are paper based in the first instance, using paint, crayon, glitter, glue, magazine cut outs, photographs and tactile materials to build a collage of images. Content for example can be drawn from family circumstances, traumatic past events, poor decisions taken in the past, personal achievements, turning points, transformatory experiences and sources of social support. Students spend time assembling biographical elements and placing them into a sequence of their choosing. Each signed and dated biography is exhibited in the classroom space and we listen together to the student’s selective presentation of his/her life. There may be material represented in the visual biography that is not disclosed as students present themselves to each other as strangers in the first instance. This collective sharing and witnessing can be a basis for group bonding (important at the beginning stages of the group) while raising issues of group boundaries,

confidentiality and trust in the group. A similar process is used at the end of the two year course, in which students form 3-4 subgroups to create a visual biography of the group from the standpoint of the present. The emphasis is on the evolving biography of the student group that has shared an education experience over a significant period of time. The collective biography is an exercise in recall and reminiscence at the ending stages of the group, but it also provides an opportunity for a group narrative on group processes to emerge. The work produced through visual biographies is colourful, imaginative and allows a movement away from word based only descriptions of experiences. The educational goal is to build student confidence to be creative throughout all aspects of the course and to encourage reflective practice; imagining and presenting one's life in a series of symbols and images is an important learning activity in achieving this goal. Students photograph the visual collective biographies of the group. This photographic record is included in individual assessment portfolios, accompanied by reflections on the exercise and what has been learned about the concept of 'group'.

Using arts based practices to express and process the complexities of self and group interactions and experiences is extended throughout the MA Community Development groupwork module, particularly in a mask making exercise in the concluding phases of the module (see for example Lordan et al, 2009). As students consider the challenges of assuming professional identities and roles, mask making activities are used to explore how best to navigate and talk about the boundaries between the private, professional and ideal selves. After discussion on individual and group perceptions of what the ideal community development worker needs in his/her 'tool box', students are invited to prepare a blank mask at home, choosing own materials but with the instruction that the mask must be wearable and can be altered if required. Over a period of two guided sessions, using art materials such as paint, clay, crayons, ribbons, baubles, cardboard, students work with their hands and add decorative and material elements to their own mask as they try on preferred and imagined identities of the professional development worker. Wearing the mask and interacting with peers, slowly the idea of becoming a professional development worker assumes a reality and a certain urgency as students prepare for their final graduation. From the initial presentation of the undecorated mask

(bringing it from home to college) to the final performance, students are animated by a deep sense of curiosity not only about the production of their own mask but also about the evolution of how they and their peers present themselves. Each stage of creation of the mask is framed by dialogue and reflection, first with a partner and eventually with the whole group, providing momentum and excitement to the process. A growing confidence is evident as new versions of themselves are presented. A framework of questions for reflection moves the dialogue from description ('tell us how you selected the materials for your mask and what you did to make it more comfortable for you to wear?') to questions that prompt deeper reflection on feelings, associations or behaviours ('tell us what you had in mind when you added this to your mask?'). The whole group consider the masks collectively and a conversation on professional development and what it means to be a professional worker is initiated by the group - a conversation that can continue to resonate throughout a working life.

On the MA Social Work course, groupwork is understood to be a relational, purposeful, informed and a collective professional activity. It is designed to be helpful, responding appropriately to the individual or group need for change or improvement in conditions, behaviours or for task accomplishment. In Ireland, groupwork is taught on a modular basis on all Social Work higher education programmes. The fundamental principles of teaching groupwork on professional Social Work courses are to expose students to models and theories, skills and roles, personal reflection, co-working, conflict analysis and relevant evaluation (see Douglas, 2000; Doel, 2012; Doel and Sawdon, 2003; Henly, 2012; Lindsay and Orton, 2011). Groupwork on the MA Social Work course (20 students) is taught as an eight hour contact section within the main Methods of Social Work module. The MA Social Work is a two year full time taught post graduate programme leading to the professional National Qualification in Social Work and registration with CORU the Irish Social Work Registration Board. The MA Social Work course includes a 14 week professional placement in which a groupwork experience is required (for example with a drugs rehabilitation group, a teen parenting group, a foster parents group) (see McGovern, 2016). The student may be required to lead the group, participate in, co-facilitate, observe or write an evaluation of the group.

Within the class experience of using the class group as the

‘therapeutic group’ (Coulshed, 1987), students are required to post and make a podcast. This can be an aural podcast or a video podcast (3 minutes). In this instance the podcasting involves a sequence of pre- and post-production preparation and publishing steps that in themselves require group organisation and interaction outside formal class periods. Script development, recording, editing, adding effects and producing MP3 audio files are all tasks associated with podcasting and developed by the sub-groups. Students splinter during the first groupwork class into sub-groups (5 groups of 4). For each of the remaining three weeks during which the course runs, students write anonymous weekly 50 word observations on ‘How I see myself within the group’ and ‘How I see the group’. These are placed or ‘posted’ confidentially into a box in the classroom. Each week a different group collects the contents of the postbox, summarises and presents the information in 4 visual slides at the beginning of the next week’s class (one of the slides must relate to a groupwork theory). The presentation becomes the basis for the podcast which remains focussed on observations about the group and awareness of group membership issues for self and others. Each week the podcast is posted on the virtual learning environment (Blackboard) for all students and course trainers. The podcast prompts a 15-20 minute class discussion on student observations and closely felt experiences of group membership over a relatively short period of time. An example of a podcast on ‘Groundrules and Conflict’ can be viewed at https://youtube/JC8sVoWMzMg?list=PLp-6_r7fj3wOraUk0laayqHTrH1zG-oWA. This short video harnesses production creativity by the group in making and presenting the video as a silent movie. The group members present knowledge and skills regarding the importance of initial group ground rules and show the elements of good contracting. This is especially evident when conflict arises within the group. Presenting this use of podcasting technology for a groupwork teaching/learning activity, the ‘experiential group’ becomes available to the ‘working group’. Students are no longer ‘talking about groups’ in the abstract, but are deeply engaged in identifying, working with and through issues that arise in their own group. Using the podcast to hold these accounts does create some distance from the immediacy and intensity of the felt experience but it does however, allow students a novel opportunity to process material that might otherwise not be brought to their attention. On final evaluation of the groupwork module on the MA Social

Work, students responded positively to producing and learning from podcasting. One student said, 'This was unlike any other class, we got to laugh and think differently. In using our own group as a template we got to understand more about how a group works, especially in its initial stages' (R1). Another student commented, 'Using the podcasts along with the slide presentations brought the practical and academic learning together. It was fun and our group felt it was a good investment for us to observe the first few weeks of our own class. We think it made us stronger as a class group and it certainly was enjoyable' (R2). Students quickly became highly attuned to podcasting, expanding the learning activity in unanticipated ways, developing humorous scripts for role plays and scenarios that were engaging, creative and playful. An unanticipated outcome of the social work groupwork course were numerous requests for more groupwork sessions and more creative and participatory arts based work. 'I would have liked more time for extra groupwork sessions as I enjoyed them so much and learned something new about myself' (R3). Deeper levels of self reflection were identified as was the capacity 'to recognise and identify group dynamics and processes as they are arose'. One student remarked on the difference between the 'casual' atmosphere of groupwork classes to more formal classroom instruction, but 'that it really worked - sometimes I was surprised by how much I was learning' (R4). Mutual respect for each other's skills emerged as a consequence of the shared learning environment and the knowledge that 'we are our own support system as a group' (R1). In addition to recording and archiving the experiential material, re-scripting and reframing commentaries in the context of relevant groupwork literature, podcasting facilitated discussion, enhanced reflection and promoted insight. Though the initial stages of groupwork were considered to be 'mentally and physically tiring' by some students, a positive appreciation of the potential of groupwork as an additional dimension to one's career profile was noted.

Discussion

Utilising groupwork methodologies for learning about membership, leadership, facilitation and group dynamics requires a pedagogy that is didactic, experiential and ethical. The academic and professional

development contexts in which courses are taught (entry level or postgraduate) combined with the variety of applications for groupwork (task groups, therapy groups, support groups, community groups) shape the intention and purpose, best expressed in course aims and objectives. Diverse conceptual underpinnings (eg. sociological, cognitive, behavioural, systemic, organisational) and theoretical foundations (individual or collective), in conjunction with awareness of different learning styles, contour how and what is taught. Such an approach requires skilled and experienced educators who are able to design and deliver generic and specialist groupwork courses, as well as guiding group members through the experience of being in and working with a group. Can more creative choices in teaching have a role in up-skilling students and enhancing professional competencies? Groupwork pedagogy places a personal and intellectual demand on students who strive to integrate theoretical knowledge and skills development in order to accomplish competency and accreditation in groupwork. They experience the push and pull of group dynamics while processing interpersonal emotions and behaviours that consequently arise. The success or failure of this complex pedagogy is attendant on a constant process of review, evaluation and dialogue about teaching, while taking into account the meaning of the group experience for students and their enthusiasm for different teaching and learning techniques.

What we know about student learning as a consequence of adopting creative technologies in our teaching is based on our engagement and observations over a long period of time and on a course evaluation carried out by Bradley (2009). We have observed evidence of playfulness among students as they work through complex conflict issues for example, of resolving problems through action and reflection, of working and thinking in collaboration with peers. We have a sense also that creative teaching technologies enhance the self awareness and professional competencies of the educator/practitioner. Knowledge is a many sided shape; for transformatory education we need to express and recognise what is possible. Though outside the scope of this paper, a critical independent evaluation of creative technologies in groupwork is clearly required to assess the adequacies and ambitions of these approaches.

Nonetheless, we propose that the use of creative technologies in groupwork education extends rather than reduces face-to-face

teaching and learning. A didactic approach is transformed by a more collaborative, dialectic and shared learning environment. Session design, preparation of materials and engagement with virtual learning technologies do require intensive up-skilling and preparation periods for both educators and students (Simon and Stauber, 2011). This investment in time and design for educators is more than offset by positive student evaluations in which 'the creative aspect' is recognized as 'reinforcing our learning but did not neglect theory' (R2). In addition to deepening students' engagement with the theory and practice of groupwork, creative pedagogies and new technologies expands the students' skill set. Taylor's (2016) deployment of book groups in social work education, offers another example of how groupwork learning is extended through a creative pedagogy. Taylor notes that 'through the book group experience, knowledge is revisited, actively applied and made available through being shared by group members within the group discussion' (p. 76). As observed by Fleming, Kelly, Taylor and Ward (2015), it is the 'ongoing appraisal of groupwork methodologies and the effectiveness of these approaches that is going to be core to academic success and subsequent employability' (p. 6). Having been immersed in experiential learning as described here, a greater confidence to work more creatively in groups is evident among the student group. This we argue is an important resource enabling the transition to professional roles and for enhancing professional practice in Community Development and Social Work.

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