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Article Title

The Application of Co-operative Inquiry to a Student Led Research Project on Social Work Placement: A Student, Professional Placement Coordinator, and Academic Tutor reflect on their Experience.

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Abstract

The authors reflect on their experiences of engaging in an international, online, student-led co-operative inquiry research project. It was designed and delivered during Covid-19 a time when placements and social work education had to adapt and accommodate new teaching and learning methods, to enable social work education programmes to continue and when all but essential international and internal travel was restricted (Dept. of Taoiseach, 2020, Archer-Kuhn et al 2020, O'Brien et al, 2023, McLaughlin, et al 2020). For the placement duration, Australian and Irish social work students and their academic tutors engaged in online conversations that were transcribed, resulting in the co-production of data. (McLaughlin *et al*, in press)

The authors include a student, an academic, and a professional placement coordinator. The research project was a first-time engagement with such an activity for all 3 authors. They discuss features of the project design and its enactment and critically reflect on their own engagement with the project. Using co-operative inquiry, the article points to how students, in collaboration with academic tutors, used co-operative inquiry and various technological affordances to complete a piece of practice research, while on placement, during Covid-19. The article points to an increase in student knowledge and confidence in completing field research.

Key Words:

Social Work Education, Student Led Research, Co-operative Inquiry, Practice Research, Experiential Learning, Placement.

Introduction

In this article, the authors introduce the reader to an innovative international, online, student-led co-operative inquiry research project. The project was designed and delivered while students were on placement during Covid-19 when all but essential international and internal travel was restricted (Dept. of Taoiseach, 2020, Archer-Kuhn et al 2020, O'Brien et al, 2023, McLaughlin, et al 2020).

This article represents some of the challenges faced by placement providers in a pandemic. The authors reflect on changing cultures of professional practice and education and adaptations to teaching and learning methods that were used to enable professional social work education programmes to continue. The reader is introduced to a unique student-led research project in which Australian and Irish social work students and their academic tutors, using co-operative inquiry methodology, engaged in online conversations that were transcribed, resulting in the co-production of data that was analysed and results formulated (McLaughlin et al, in press). The authors critically reflect on their own engagement with the research project and point to the challenges and opportunities afforded them through their engagement with the project. This project enlightened all participants to the potential of technology to enhance learning. It increased student knowledge and confidence about applied research on placement, through a process of doing research.

In March 2020 student social work placements were suddenly and immediately impacted in Ireland and worldwide in response to Covid-19. Educators found themselves navigating two interlinked global trends: 1) workplace learning that was changing radically; and 2) the immediate need to identify and develop placement opportunities (Short et al., 2022).

The academic and the professional placement coordinator are both members of INCInq, an international network of co-operative inquirers that meets monthly online to discuss challenges and innovations in social work education (Pascoe et al., 2023). This expands their global reach and allows them to learn more about fieldwork challenges, educational practices, and placement innovations. Engagement opened new avenues of thinking around placement provision and methods of practice learning. Throughout Covid-19 the network provided invaluable support at a time of unprecedented change in social work education. Members of the network published their research findings in 2022 presenting their experiences of using co-operative inquiry as a research methodology (Short et al., 2022).

Short et al., (2022) examined emergent themes from four innovative international social work placement scenarios. The research included fieldwork placements in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland. The findings pointed to "enablers, markers, and aspects of quality learning" that helped to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by placement innovation and learning. The main challenges that were identified included placement scarcity, rapid placement innovation, and the need to mitigate risk while preserving placement quality. The authors concluded that creativity and innovation, guided by well-articulated educational principles, learning outcomes, and pedagogical practices, promote the construction of quality placements that transcend potential risks (Short et al., 2022). How to deliver quality placements in a pandemic posed both challenges and opportunities for all involved in social work education.

In Ireland, the immediate response to the unprecedented demands posed by Covid-19 was for staff in the University to consult with stakeholders including the Social Workers Registration Board (CORU), social work students, and front-line social work agencies to ensure the continuation of fieldwork placements. Preserving the integrity of the fieldwork placement

experience, in the face of a global pandemic, was a primary concern. An online pre-placement preparation module was developed focused on GDPR and the use of technology to support online supervision, working online and remotely, self-care, and skills-based knowledge including using online platforms for communication. Practice teachers were provided with education and training resources via webinars and online CPD (Burns, K & Ó Súilleabháin, F., 2021).

The impact of level 5 restrictions on social work practice, education, and fieldwork placements resulted in an immediate shift to online or hybrid placements (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; McFadden et al., 2020, O'Brien et al, 2023). Placement planning, procurement, and allocation required greater flexibility, creativity, and innovation from social work educators, placement providers, and students. In Ireland, many agencies continued to provide fieldwork placements, described as the "signature pedagogy" of social work education (Wayne et al., 2010). However, pandemic restrictions reduced opportunities for face-to-face contact. As reported by O'Brien et al (2023), unless engaged in important social or healthcare activities, such as social work, the general populace was required to work from home. Travel was only permitted where it was deemed necessary (Dept. of Taoiseach, 2020). Adaptations had to be made to workspaces to accommodate social distancing and remote working. Accordingly, cultures of learning on placement were impacted, limiting opportunities for students to engage in informal, on-site learning. Reflecting the international landscape, the delivery of formal education was transformed and teaching was delivered almost exclusively online (Archer-Kuhn et al 2020, Bowden, 2020, McLaughlin, et al 2020, O'Brien, et al 2023). The landscape for fieldwork placements and social work education had changed. INCInq researchers engaged in discussions about more creative and responsive ways to address placement scarcity and practice restrictions. As members, the academic tutor and professional placement coordinator were acquainted with a successful student-led research project that had been completed prior

to 2021 by Australian students (Lomas et al, 2022). It was agreed to extend the reach of the student-led research project to include an Irish student.

Describing the Student-Led International Research Project

The project was led by seven social work students completing their placements, including one Irish participant. The inquiry focussed on rural advantage and disadvantage in Ireland and Australia. The aim for participants was to co-write a journal article on a mutually agreed topic and the inquiry focused on issues affecting isolated communities and their access to social work services. Students involved were on placement in Australia (n=six fully online placements) and Ireland (one on-site placement with an online research component). The seven students, supported by seven academics met weekly online to conduct in-depth conversations that were transcribed contemporaneously via Google Docs. The conversations involved sharing knowledge and observations. Available literature was accessed by students and linked with themes emerging from the online conversations. The data used in the research was gathered from the meeting minutes on Google Docs, which constituted the collective wisdom of all participants. This unique student-led research project was undertaken fully online (McLaughlin et al, in press).

Despite the opportunities that student engagement in the research project offered, challenges to participation included how to support the students' learning, practically and academically. How to mitigate the risk of the student feeling overwhelmed and ensure that their primary placement learning objectives were being met and not compromised by their engagement with the project? How to overcome the practical challenges of time zones and geographical distance?

Previous research (Short et al., 2022), pointed to factors that supported quality learning including access to technological affordances such as the use of laptops. New practices were adopted by the professional placement coordinator to help build trust and promote good communication practices between the university, students, and placement providers e.g., peer support, and additional CPD training opportunities. In addition, pre-placement preparation for students included an increased focus on the application and use of technological skills, ensuring students were equipped to work remotely with the technical and communication skills necessary to participate (Short et al., 2022).

Several significant factors contributed to the final decision to include a social work student from Ireland in the project. The prior engagement of the academic and professional placement coordinator with the INCInq network was crucial. INCInq had established systems of organisation, and communication, and used Zoom and Google Docs to enable international participation that transcended time and geographical distances. The design of the network included monthly meetings where trust was established, collaborative and collegiate relationships were developed, a shared value base was established, and shared goals were identified. As participants from INCInq were involved in forming and informing the establishment of the student-led research project, trust was already established with the key participants. Trust-building with students was established in online meetings using principles and practices of engagement including the development of collaborative, collegiate communication techniques, scheduling of regular meetings, sharing roles and responsibilities, and a shared value base.

Research Methodology: Co-operative Inquiry

The student-led research project was designed and enacted using co-operative inquiry as the research methodology. CI is participatory, inclusive, highly collaborative, and action-based

(Ospina et al, 2008; Alston & Bowles, 2018). The process uses “critical friends”, where knowledge and experiences are analysed by the group. The process is grounded in the idea that research can be conducted *with* people, not *on* people (Napan et al, 2017). CI highlights the principle of the equality of voices within the co-authoring process, where the researchers are also participants in the research (Short & Healy, 2017). This methodology aims to eliminate inequality in research, where everyone is on equal footing and all opinions are sought (Doyle et al 2023).

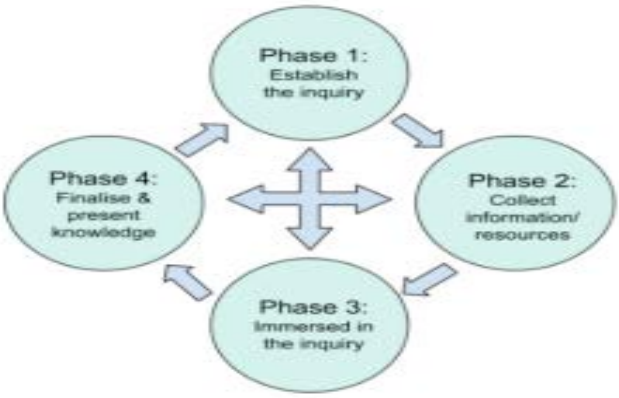
The CI methodology involves four phases that are cycled through to bring about opportunities for reflection and the sharing of ideas (McLaughlin et al, in press). This process of reflection and action allows for developing the research topic while adding to the depth of the data (Short & Healy, 2017).

There are four phases of co-operative inquiry. These four distinctive phases are shown in

Figure 1.

Figure 1: Four phases of co-operative inquiry

A co-designed graphic representation of the four phases of co-operative inquiry. Based on Heron & Reason (2001) and Short & Healy (2017).



Pascoe, E., et al (2023)

Phase one:

In phase one, the group comes together as a new research team. Ground rules are established to facilitate a cohesive group process and enhance member participation. In this phase, the method of data collection is agreed upon (Short & Healy, 2017). The details of the project and method are discussed, and agreement is reached on the focus of the research and how the data will be collected.

Phase Two:

In phase two, deep reflections and discussion of the research topic take place. Members can bring their opinions and experiences to the group thus furthering the data collection and discussions.

The combined knowledge gained in these sessions inform the inquiry discussions, and central themes begin to emerge, which lay the foundations for the resulting article (McLaughlin *et al*, in press).

Phase Three:

In this phase, the research team becomes immersed in the research topic. There can be a focus on sharing ideas and discussing practice experiences and personal lived experiences of the members as a way to fully engage the team in the topic being researched (McLaughlin *et al*, in press).

Phase Four:

The fourth and final phase consists of the research team critically reviewing the data and the themes that have emerged. Patterns in the data may be identified to discover common themes and interpret meanings. Furthermore, the team begins to write the journal article in a collaborative way, making sure all voices and opinions are heard and respected. Following this, an extensive and collaborative editing process ensues to produce the final product.

Reflections on Engagement with the Student-led Co-operative Inquiry Research Project

Upon successful completion, all three authors agreed to meet online to discuss and reflect on our experience of engaging with the project. We used Google Docs to record and transcribe our conversations and several important learning themes emerged. Each of the authors agreed to write short reflections on their learning.

Student's Reflections

I joined the co-operative inquiry after being approached by staff from the Fieldwork Office and Course Team who explained what the project would be about and what would be expected of me. Initially, I was intrigued as this was a research method I had never heard of before. It was made clear that my involvement in the project was voluntary and the decision to join was my own.

Sitting with Uncertainty

As this was a new method of research for me and most, if not all, of the students, there was a lot of hesitancy and uncertainty throughout the project. Particularly at the beginning, it was difficult to see how the article was going to come together. During meetings, we had deep, thoughtful conversations and generated many ideas on the topic. However, sometimes it seemed that the more ideas we had, the harder it was to get a clear picture of what we wanted our article to be.

What I found helpful during this period of uncertainty was the knowledge that some of the academics had previously been involved in other CI projects. They assured us that the process could be messy, but it would come together in the end. Knowing this felt like a safety net for us students who had no previous experience with CI. We had confidence in the group and in the academics, who were able to guide us through the stages of the article.

Finding Our Voices as Students

One of the biggest challenges for me throughout the process was finding the confidence to work alongside academics on an equal footing. As a student, it felt innate to take a backseat when in a group of academics discussing research. However, this was a student-led inquiry, and the student voice was at the forefront of the whole project.

Finding that confidence took me several weeks, as at the beginning of the project I saw myself as just a student, not a “researcher”. The academics on the team pushed us students out of our comfort zone to see ourselves as more than just students. We were partners during the research, and the student's voice was almost seen as more important and in need of highlighting.

To gain self-confidence to see myself as a researcher, like many of the students, took practice. Every week the group came together to share thoughts and ideas. Initially, I was hesitant to share my ideas openly. I felt like my ideas wouldn't be as valuable as the academics when it came to writing a journal article. It was extremely important that each week the academics encouraged us to share our thoughts and to lead the conversations. As this continuous encouragement went on, it became easier to open up and share my ideas, even if I thought they weren't of value to the article. The group was a safe, open space where we could use each other as a soundboard for our ideas. This made the whole process more creative and allowed the students to find our voices.

Dismantling Boundaries

The CI experience promoted the dismantling of boundaries between students and academics. During the process, the traditional roles of academia were turned on their head, and the students led the process. This was a new way of thinking for us, as we were used to being taught by academics who are more experienced and "know better" than we do.

However, the CI process facilitated and empowered the students to spearhead the article formation and take charge of our own research. As this was a student-led project the academics consistently reminded us that we were the ones who had the most say. Our thoughts and opinions were valued as those of peers rather than as students who need to be taught how to conduct research. This environment allowed us to get creative with this new research method and share our opinions freely without fear of judgement. However, we knew the academics were there as a soundboard for our ideas and as a safety net if we ever got disheartened during the process.

The CI project highlighted the differences between learning research in the classroom versus in practice. As students, we are required to take modules about research and we are taught about various research methods, ideologies, etc. Yet, the process of doing research is an important aspect of learning that many students can miss out on throughout their time in university. Had I not participated in this project, I would not have the same level of knowledge and confidence about research that I have now. The process of doing is just as important as the process of learning, which is why CI is such an enriching experience for students.

Professional Placement Coordinator's Reflections

As a practising professionally qualified and registered social worker now working in professional administration, the transition from social work practice to working in higher education was a steep learning curve. The primary role is that of placement procurement which in Ireland operates on a "grace and favour" model and reflects the crisis that exists internationally with field placement scarcity within social work (Ayala et al, 2018, Zuckowski et al 2019).

Bridging the Worlds of Academia and Professional Practice

As in other international jurisdictions, the Irish accrediting body CORU recognises placement impact on the quality of social work services delivered to the public. CORU's regulatory responsibility is to protect the public by setting, promoting, and enforcing high standards of professional education, training, and competence. Simultaneously I found myself learning about and transferring social work skills to the fieldwork role and making sense of what McIntosh and Nutt (2022) refer to as "integrated practice" which has emerged as a concept for professionals working in higher education. The 'blended professional' can naturally cross boundaries, and often have both professional and academic credentials. This concept of the

‘third space’ as the interface between academic and professional activity in higher education was first articulated by Celia Whitechurch in 2013. This helped my transition from practice to working within higher education, ever mindful of the professional standards required during a pandemic.

Meaningful, Motivating, and Energising Engagement

The potential for students to become active practitioner-researchers informed my commitment to our participation. As an applied profession, the student-led research project facilitated a new creative and innovative development for active and applied engagement in research on placement. Within the context of placement scarcity and pressure, I found this a meaningful, motivating, and energising project to engage with. This was a very different research opportunity in so far as it is student-led, international, and mentored by an academic tutor expert in co-operative inquiry in collaboration with a wider academic co-operative inquiry group. In terms of university graduate attributes and academic strategy (UCC, 2021) this opportunity reflected the core values of both social work and the university as evidenced in the teaching award secured to finance student participation. The application for the teaching award was peer-reviewed, and this was essential practically to fund student involvement and bring credibility to a project that didn’t have a profile within the course or School. It isn’t usual that a research opportunity would be championed by a professional placement coordinator. This reflects the earlier mentioned "third space" concept within higher education, as well as the strengths-based approach used, and importantly demonstrates that social work is an applied practice with transferable knowledge, values, and skills to facilitate an applied research methodology for placement learning.

Shared Values

Motivated by shared values I ensured the student participant had sufficient support, time, and resources to make the most of this learning opportunity. Participation with INCInq provided a framework for ongoing reflection, analysis, and learning about the sense I was making of how to practise social work within this new professional administrative context "third space" aligned with professional standards, university learning expectations, and practice placement requirements. Undertaking additional postgraduate CPD in the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education further helped me position the professional requirements of social work within the academic framework in which it is situated. Bringing practice insight and experience to the professional administrative role, my engagement was one of leadership and facilitation, at a time that both enabled and required creativity and innovation for placements.

Academic's Experience

A Stimulus to Reflect: Covid-19

Reflecting back on 2019/2020, when a global pandemic changed the world of social work education, I am reminded of the phrase '*being uprooted*' Nakkuala (1998). The pandemic presented the 'surprise' that Dewey (1933) defined as the stimulus to reflective inquiry. He identifies certain attitudes of mind that predispose us to reflect; 'openness' 'wholeheartedness' and 'responsibility. When invited to participate I was open-minded to the possibilities it had to offer in terms of rethinking and reconfiguring approaches to teaching practice research, which traditionally involved teaching theories and methodologies in the classroom and undertaking research in the field. As a member of INCInq, I experienced co-operative inquiry as a methodology that prized reflective pedagogies and experiential approaches to learning (Lyons, 1998).

Significant influencers: Time, Space, Opportunity

My openness to engaging in the project coincided with my retirement, I had the time and space to engage in a new project. I began to reassess my thinking about teaching and learning in a changed educational and professional landscape. Similarly, the student appreciated the dedicated tutorial time given to engage with the project:

A Collaborative Process: Learning from Experience

The methodology is founded on principles of collaboration, participation, equality, and social justice (Alston & Bowles, 2018). I was excited at the prospect of using cooperative inquiry with students on placement to complete research. In my role as tutor, I set out to build a relationship with the student assisting them to develop trust in the methodology and the group process. The student-led research project has many features in common with Donald Schon's Practicum (1983), which promotes learning in a setting created for participants to acquire certain skills. The practicum environment is a supportive one that embodies principles of trust-building and learning by doing. In this project, a safe collaborative space was created for students and academics to work together, share ideas and knowledge, and learn collaboratively about the research process. The collaborative space bears all the hallmarks of a democratic learning space where responsibilities are shared, and roles are given equal status (Friere, 1970).

Bridging the gap between students and academics

Co-operative inquiry champions collaboration in research. The student project goes a long way towards bridging traditional power divides that have existed over time between the student and academic, the learner and the knower: "It *was almost like comforting in a way to know that we were all sort of in it together and ….I liked the equal footing that we were all on. Where sort*

of everything was in the air for a long time, like a good few weeks where people didn't really grasp it yet." (Student reflection)

Changing perceptions of research

The student reflections demonstrate that co-operative inquiry, when applied to practice research, changed her perceptions and experiences of research. The research was experienced as accessible and creative: "*It was just so different than anything I had ever done before, or even what I sort of conceptualised research to be. It definitely, like, broadened my understanding… I think it made me see that research can be a lot more creative" …*". (Student reflection)

The student's advocacy for the inclusion of co-operative inquiry in the social work curriculum points to its significance:

"*I had not had the opportunity to do collaborative research before and I learned a lot about myself and how I work as part of a group. ….I learned skills from this project that I wouldn't have had by doing research on my own. I felt more confident about doing research, as this experience made research accessible to students in a very non-intimidating way…",* (Student reflection)

The Power of the Group Dynamic

The group dynamic is a central feature of the co-operative inquiry process (Alston & Bowles, 2018, Reason, 2002). The importance of the nurturing environment and strengths-based focus of group discussions was key to student's learning :

"I think what sort of kept me going was the people in the group who were so positive about the whole thing…," (Student Reflection)

Trusting the process and embracing the uncertainty proved challenging but was acknowledged as important:

"*We went in not having a question…not having set goals. We didn't know what the outcomes were going to be, but that was kind of the point of it. That's what made the project what it was……to sit with the discomfort of not knowing and not having all the answers."* (Student Reflection).

Discussion

The authors set out to examine and discuss their involvement with an international student-led research project that took place online in 2021/2022. The project used co-operative inquiry as the methodology of choice (Ospina et al, 2008; Alston & Bowles, 2018). When completed the three authors decided to meet online to reflect on their engagement with the project and to identify significant learning. While the project was undertaken during a pandemic, when adaptations had to be made to teaching practices and placement provision, it is clear from the reflections of the authors that many successful outcomes emerged from this project that can inform social work education, beyond the pandemic.

All the authors refer to the use of online technology in progressing more creative and diverse student learning and placement experiences. The international reach of the project was facilitated by the availability of technology and the parallel upskilling of all involved in its use. Access to technological affordances has progressed in recent years, the challenge is to harness its potential towards optimising educational and learning experiences. The collaborative nature of co-operative inquiry fits well with the values of the social work profession i.e. social justice, inclusion, and collaboration (IASW, 2020, IFSW, 2023). It provides a good template for teaching social work research that reaches beyond the classroom into placement. The project

promotes research-ready social work graduates entering the workforce (SWRB, 2019) with the skills needed to produce new evidence to contribute to practice. The process of engaging in co-operative inquiry aligns with the philosophy and practice of reflection (Schon, 1983), it fits well with the social work mission and can be easily included in social work curricula. The project demonstrates how co-operative inquiry helps to foster collegiality and respect and supports the collapsing of traditional boundaries between academics and students and research and practice.

The authors believe the project design can be replicated and developed to help transform ways of teaching and doing practice research. Undoubtedly, for student-led research projects to develop and thrive they will require the support of academics, researchers, and organisational funding. The authors hope this article will help promote creative teaching and learning practices in the field and classroom and foster positive attitudes toward the use of co-operative inquiry in research.

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