



Creative Approaches to Social Work Practice Learning

**Edited by
Heidi Dix and Aisha Howells**

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We would also like to show gratitude to the poets whose work appears throughout this book for generously sharing their poetry with us and of course we need to acknowledge the wonderfully creative chapter authors. A mention also needs to be made to the early reviewers and whose constructive, wise feedback helped to shape the direction of the book – you know who you are.

This book is dedicated to social work practice educators, on-site supervisors and students whose contribution to social work education is often underestimated. We see you and celebrate you!

Meet the editors

Heidi Dix is a senior lecturer in social work at the University of Suffolk, as well as the lead for quality assurance and practice development in a local authority Youth Justice Service. She is also the safeguarding trustee for Outreach Youth, a charitable incorporated organisation for children and young people who identify as LGBTQIA+. Her interests include social work practice learning and relational, trauma-informed practice.

Aisha Howells is a senior lecturer in social work at the University of Suffolk. She is a registered social worker interested in understanding the world through a critical lens and passionate about carrying out research in child and family social work, trauma and abuse, lived experience, narrative approaches and practice education. An experienced practice educator, Aisha's love for creativity in learning underpins her entire teaching approach.

Meet the contributors

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Chapters

Claire Skilleter is a Practice Education Lead in the Suffolk and Norfolk Teaching Partnership in the UK. Claire has over 30 years' experience working with children and families and is a qualified social worker and practice educator. In her current role Claire supports students, practice educators, and on-site supervisors in Norfolk County Council. Claire is particularly interested in relationship based social work and creative methods for working with students, individuals, and families. Claire regularly presents her work at practice education training events both locally in Norfolk and Suffolk and nationally. In 2021, Claire was named Practice Educator of the Year in the Social Worker of the Year Awards.

Anna Wright is a lecturer in social work at the University of East Anglia. Anna qualified as a social worker in 2010 and has been a practice educator since 2015. She has worked in local authorities as a social worker, manager and, most recently, in a service improvement team with particular focus on developing best practice for the support of newly qualified social workers, students, practice educators and on-site supervisors. Her interests are in creative approaches to social work education and in developing reflective supervisory practice. Outside of work Anna enjoys swimming outdoors and pottering on her allotment.

Garfield Hunt started his career in social care in 1990, working in residential care with adolescents. During his career, he has worked across the statutory, voluntary and private sectors, and before entering academia, worked as an independent social worker. His teaching interests include anti-discrimination, anti-oppression, anti-racism, equality and diversity, leaving care, housing and homelessness, developmental psychology and

MEET THE CONTRIBUTORS

safeguarding/child protection. He has particular interests in outcomes for fostered and adopted children, for care leavers and student feedback and engagement. Garfield is passionate about the experiences of 'global majorities' staff and students in education (primary school to level 7).

Alison Taylor is mother to a 24-year-old man who was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder at the age of two. She is also completing a PhD in resilience with mothers of children with autism as a case study and working as an academic. Alison believes that people learn by being able to relate stories to their own lives and seeing how that helps to apply the theories. By sharing her own story and ideas, Alison hopes to build bridges between people with lived experience and those who provide services.

Nora Duckett is a registered social worker and academic with 18 years practice-based knowledge and experience, predominately in services for children and families. Since 2004 Nora has worked as an educator in higher education. Nora's research interests reflect her practice-based experiences and focus on improving understandings of professional dangerousness in child protection social work education and practice.

Caroline Aldridge is currently a freelance speaker and trainer, and an experienced children and families social worker, practice educator and lecturer. Her qualifications include: BA (Hons) Social Work, MA in Advanced Social Work, Diploma in Teaching and Education, and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She is part-way through a professional doctorate in Health and Social Care. Caroline is author of *He Died Waiting: Learning the Lessons – A Bereaved Mother's View of Mental Health Services*. More information about Caroline is on her website www.learningsocialworker.com and she can be contacted via Twitter @CarolineAldrid5

Poems

Angela Bell is a second-year undergraduate mature student, studying a BA (Hons) in English Literature and Linguistics at the University of Suffolk. She has a love for the written and spoken word and hopes to move into a career based in the field of linguistics, with particular interest in speech and language therapy of aphasia patients. She has enjoyed reading classic British literature during her studies and has developed a new-found appreciation for dystopian novels as well as modernist texts of the early twentieth century.

Demi Bowler is a proud mum of two wonderful children and has been writing poetry since her teenage years. Whenever troubled in life, she has turned to verse and poetry to help as an important part of healing and recovery. Demi's 20-year career as a singer and performer has strengthened her passion for lyrics, being able to connect with people encompassing a multitude of emotions. Demi describes poetry as her therapy to release thoughts with pen and paper and feels privileged to share her words with you.

Makayla Bowler is an 18-year-old singer/songwriter who has achieved four A levels (two of which are in languages) and has begun to teach English to students all over the world as a second language. She has always had a passion for languages and expressing the way she feels through writing and, ultimately, storytelling. With personal experience and a unique perspective being the driving force behind Makayla's work, she feels honoured to share with you a few of the many words which she has written but never got the chance to say.

Alison Dudeney joined the Adventures in Creative Writing course at Cardiff University in 1999 with the legendary British Beat-poet Chris Torrance. It was a revelation; experimenting with word and thought set her firmly on the path to becoming a writer. In 2020, after leaving a career in management, she began her MA in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of Suffolk. She writes short stories and poetry and is currently working on a novel set in the Second World War.

Amanda Hodgkinson is an award-winning novelist, poet and a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Suffolk. Her writing has been published in 17 languages and is focused on place, memory, family and the dynamics of love.

Lanai Collis-Phillips is 20 years old and studying at university to become a children's nurse. She believes that everyone can play a role in fighting systemic and institutional injustice and believes this is easier to do when we work together.

Introduction

Heidi Dix and Aisha Howells



People work in different ways and learn in different ways.

(Student 8B, Howells and Bald, [2020](#))

Creativity in social work is discussed in many different spaces and in a variety of ways. As social work is a profession underpinned by human rights and social justice, social workers are often required to find creative ways to work collaboratively with children, adults and communities to support them to access and enact their rights and entitlements. There is also a long-standing debate as to whether social work is an *art* or a *science*, with evidence-informed approaches often depicted at one end of the spectrum and innovation and creativity deemed to be at the other. These ideas are sometimes discussed among concerns that the profession has become managerial and overly bureaucratic, leaving social workers frustrated that too much of their time is taken up doing administrative tasks and leaving little capacity to work relationally with others in line with

the values of the profession. Conversely, the request that social workers themselves need to be more creative is often espoused by various government departments and organisations in response to their lack of investment and chronic under-resourcing of human services.

Creativity involves an ability to create new ideas and problem solve in a novel way. Requiring both originality and value, it is about both offering a fresh perspective and being useful in some way. It is suggested that creativity is something that cannot be taught but exists within all of us and requires inspiration and opportunities to flourish. An example of this can be found in early 2020, where due to the challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, practice educators, on-site supervisors and students found innovative ways to engage with learning and teaching in a digital world. Yet, perhaps many of these people would not have described themselves as creative individuals prior to this experience. The same can be said for some of the contributors to this book who would not consider themselves to be particularly creative, but due to their passion for a particular area of interest have produced original resources for you to use in social work practice learning.

A brief overview of the book contents

The intention of this book is to provide a resource for practice educators and students to support learning and teaching. Each chapter contains standalone tools that can be used in the practice learning placement. As well as providing a brief description of each tool, with examples of how it can be used within practice learning and on many occasions in social work practice more widely, the author(s) of each chapter describe the inspiration behind their innovation. Each chapter also provides a brief outline of the theoretical ideas and/or concepts that underpin the tools they have developed. Aspects of each chapter have been illustrated to enable easy identification of the different features so that you can dip in and out of the book as needed. In the appendices, a copy of the tool has been provided for you and the student to easily access.

Interwoven between many of the chapters are original pieces of poetry or spoken word. We suggest that these poems can be used to support learning, teaching and assessment in a way that works for both practice educators and students.

The book attempts to mirror the journey of the practice learning opportunity and so **Chapter 1** sees Claire Skilleter discussing the importance

of beginning well through establishing an effective relationship. Using the different components of a chair, Skilleter discusses how a safe environment can be created to enable students to undertake their best learning. Skilleter also provides an innovative way to capture and record the achievements of the student as the practice learning opportunity progresses.

Awareness of digital poverty and the impact of this is increasing, and in **Chapter 2**, Anna Wright provides simple yet fun activities to help practice educators and on-site supervisors explore this subject with students as well as any accessibility issues they may be experiencing. Wright also highlights the importance of a 'team around the student' approach and provides a helpful checklist that can be used to prepare the team for the student joining them.

Anti-racist practice has a long-established history in social work. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 reinvigorated the profession's commitment to anti-racism and in **Chapter 3** Garfield Hunt outlines tools to help all involved in practice learning to consider their understanding and experience of racism, as well as highlighting the need to always promote and actively engage in anti-racist social work practice.

In **Chapter 4**, Caroline Aldridge highlights the importance of providing a trauma-informed environment to enable students to understand and make sense of their own experiences as part of an exploration of self. Aldridge takes established tools used within social work, such as chronologies and timelines, and translates these to the practice learning setting to provide innovative ways they can be used to support learning and teaching.

Being a practice educator in social work can be a lonely endeavour with social work practitioners having to undertake the task on top of their usual roles and responsibilities, with little support from the organisation and limited professional development opportunities available to them (Plenty and Gower, 2013). As such, **Chapter 5**, by Heidi Dix and Aisha Howells, provides a tool which outlines a set of reflective activities to enable practice educators to consider their motivation and commitment to students, as well as helping them to explore how comfortable they feel with the legitimate authority they hold within the role. This chapter also provides a tool to help students and practice educators create a rights-based culture within their social work practice.

Narrative approaches and storytelling are used within social work practice, and in **Chapter 6**, Alison Taylor recounts her experiences in the form of vignettes as a way to encourage practice educators and students to build confidence and consider their well-being to develop into autonomous professionals.

In **Chapter 7**, Nora Duckett discusses the importance of professional curiosity in social work and provides reflective activities in the form of checklists that can be used by practice educators and students to explore assumptions, understand aspects of professional dangerousness and help the development of professional curiosity.

Finally, **Chapter 8** sees Claire Skilleter discussing the importance of endings in social work and provides several innovative ways to support students to end their work with people with lived experience effectively. The chapter also provides a tool to support both practice educators and students to mark the end of the practice learning opportunity.









Going forward, we suspect that some aspects of practice learning will continue to occur virtually for the foreseeable future. Like some of the contributors to this book, you may not initially consider yourself to be a 'creative' person. However, we hope to take you on a journey of discovery and through engaging with the tools outlined in the chapters, you will become inspired to explore this side of yourself. We actively encourage you to utilise both your unconscious and conscious mind to release your inner creativity and, in turn, motivate students to release theirs and participate in imaginative social work practice learning.

References

- Howells, A and Bald, C (2020) 'This Is My Oasis': An Exploration of Student Hub Support for Social Work Students' Wellbeing. *Social Work Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1861242>
- Plenty, J and Gower, D (2013) The Reform of Social Work Practice Education and Training and Supporting Practice Educators. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 12(2): 48–66.

A note about illustrations

This book is centred on different and diverse creative approaches. Both of us, as editors, are visual learners where our learning is often enriched with visual elements. As such, we have repeated illustrations throughout the chapters indicating specific sections that we believe are important for you as practice educators and students to know, so that you can use the tools to their maximum potential. Although the names of the headings may be different or appear in a different order within each chapter, the illustrations reflect the details in the boxes below.

	Tool An introduction to the tool. This provides a brief <i>overview</i> .
	Inspiration Where the inspiration for the tool is drawn from. This is the tool's <i>origins</i> .
	Theory The theoretical perspective which underpins the tool. This is social work practice being <i>evidence informed</i> .
	Example Where an example is provided of the tool being used. This brings the <i>tool to life</i> .
	Application The description of putting the tool into practice in learning and teaching. This is the <i>how-to</i> .
	Social work practice Shows you how to use the tool in your work with people with lived experience. This is about your <i>day-to-day practice</i> .
	Three key points Outlines three key take-away learning points. This is the <i>summary</i> .
	Poem This is a further <i>learning tool</i> to use within the practice educator and student relationship.

Chapter 1

Let's start at the beginning

Claire Skilleter

In the beginning...

This chapter will look at the importance of beginning student practice learning opportunities and working relationships well, thus setting the scene for ending well. In fact, Kadushin (1990) suggests that the beginning is where preparations for endings should start. The start of the practice learning opportunity and the relationship between the practice educator and the student is, in part, the beginning of the end. It is here, at the start, where we already know when our supervisory relationship will end. As such, the beginning of the practice learning opportunity is best placed to create a relationship of safety and trust, which are the underpinnings to end well. Put simply, getting these basics right, from the start, shapes the supervisory relationship and the path it may follow.

In terms of practice educators and students working together from the outset, McMullin's (2017) model for relationship building is transferrable to the student practice learning process. The model has four stages, all of which need attention and are of equal importance:

- engage;
- negotiate;
- enable;
- ending.

The model is not meant to be prescriptive and all relationships are unique. However, the model is helpful in breaking down the process of relationship building (McColgan and McMullin, 2017). To apply the model to the practice educator and student relationship, the practice educator and student begin the practice learning opportunity by *engaging* with each other maybe through a pre-placement meeting, a supervision agreement and getting to know each other activities. As part of the practice learning agreement and throughout the placement the practice educator and student *negotiate* the

learning opportunities. The practice educator then *enables* the student to develop learning through practice and the use of supervision. Finally, there is an '*ending*'; the practice educator writes the final report and makes their final assessment. Work with people with lived experience draws to a close and the working relationship between the practice educator and the students ends. Sometimes when things go wrong, there are enforced endings which happen earlier than planned. For example, the student withdraws or does not pass the practice learning opportunity and it is terminated. When this happens, the ending is likely to be painful for both student and practice educator and the opportunity to 'de-brief' and reflect on the experience is likely to be vital for both the student and practice educator.

This chapter will pay attention to the 'engage' stage of relationship building, but also has an eye on the ending stage (which is further discussed in [Chapter 8](#)). McColgan and McMullin (2017) state that potential endings should be discussed at the engage stage and the two practice tools presented in this chapter, **The Supervision Chair** and **Placement Achievements Boxes**, go some way to enabling this. They also support the development of a safe, secure and appreciative dialogue between the practice educator and student and promote a sense of working in partnership. One practice educator who has used **The Supervision Chair** with a student said:



It broke down barriers really quickly. It helped to stress supervision as a joint endeavour, more equal than the usual agreement I would use... I really feel it helped us develop a fantastic working relationship.

The student said: *'I felt really clear about my supervision and that we were working in partnership. It really helped set the scene for the type of supervision we wanted to create... It helped me understand the sort of safe space supervision could be.'*

This chapter draws heavily on therapeutic techniques. It is important to recognise that practice educators are not therapists, but we can work in a relationship-based way with students. The practice tools may indeed require the practice educator to share something of themselves. This is particularly relevant to the Social GRRRAACCEESSS (Burnham, 2012) discussion later in this chapter. In addition, taking a humanist perspective to adult learning, Rogers (1994) would say that congruence requires the practice educator to be true to oneself and to not be afraid to express and discuss feelings in order to develop a rapport with the learner.



For many years I have used supervision agreements with students; these have tended to cover expectations, boundaries, needs and responsibilities. I have always had conversations about power and how to make supervision a safe space too. However, these supervision agreements have always felt quite limited and formal, one-sided even. I try to model creativity, building a rapport and relationship-based practice from the start of my working relationship with students, and I began to think about how the supervision agreement was not aligned to these. When we started to work virtually at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, I anticipated it was going to be even harder to develop a rapport, model creativity and 'do' relationship-based practice from the start of the practice learning opportunity. I, therefore, started to think about other ways I could carry out a supervision agreement discussion with students.

The supervision chair – What do you need to feel comfortable and secure in supervision?



Let's settle in



The Supervision Chair acts as a supervision agreement and is a visual and creative way to pay attention to the beginning of the working relationship between the practice educator and student. It has a strong focus on enabling the student to feel safe and secure, which is particularly important for virtual supervision where these elements can be more challenging.

A little theory



The Supervision Chair is influenced by the concept of a secure base, which comes originally from the work of Bowlby (1969). In line with Bowlby's concept of a secure base, supervision is seen as a comfortable chair, a safe haven to return to from the stressors of placement, where the student can safely explore feelings and thoughts, have challenging conversations to promote learning and then return to the outside world feeling that things are more manageable. Thinking about the practice educator and the student as a team, **The Supervision Chair** is also closely aligned to the concept of the team as secure base. In their model of the Team as a Secure Base, Biggart et al (2017) identify five domains for promoting a secure base: availability, sensitivity, acceptance, co-operation and membership. **The Supervision Chair** promotes these domains.

Chair legs – Availability: The practice educator is there for the student.

Chair arms and getting in and out of the chair – Sensitivity: The student feels safe enough to explore feelings.

Chair seat – Acceptance: The student's feelings, identity and views will be accepted in supervision.

Chair back and getting in and out of the chair – Co-operation: This is a joint endeavour between the practice educator and student.

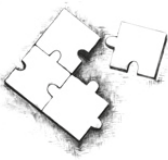
Chair seat – Membership: The practice educator and student value and understand each other.



*The concept of **The Supervision Chair** came from thinking about my own experiences of supervision. One of my first managers, Elaine, did in fact have two comfortable armchairs in her office, which were only sat in for supervision discussions.*

I always recall feeling safe with her, in supervision, to say whatever was on my mind. When I left that chair, I often felt that I had learnt something maybe about myself or I had some new understanding to take forward. I felt more connected to my work, emotionally contained, valued and appreciated. Of course, this process was little to do with the armchair, but the way in which Elaine conducted the supervision. When I reflected on what it was Elaine actually did to enable this process to happen, availability, sensitivity, acceptance, co-operation and membership seemed to make sense.

The how-to



For working virtually, **The Supervision Chair** template can be shared with the student and used to guide the discussion. The student's comments can be written on the template as each section of the chair has been discussed. The template can be individualised by using an image of a chair

chosen by the student. In comparison, when working in person, students can be asked to create a large drawing of **The Supervision Chair** or a 3D chair model with boxes and tubes. **The Supervision Chair** could also be created by using a collage of magazine pictures of chairs or online chair images. The practice educator and student can write all over the chair collage, or create speech bubbles, arrows and pictures to represent the supervision agreement discussions at each stage of building the chair.

The practice educator should start by talking to the student about the concept of supervision as a comfortable chair, a secure base. Explain that **The Supervision Chair** is built from the bottom up, similar to the concept of using co-production techniques where policy or approaches are influenced by staff or individuals.

There are six stages to building **The Supervision Chair**. The practice educator and the student talk through each stage and record the discussions, on either the template, large drawing, model or collage.



IMAGE 1.1A: 1. Chair legs – What do you need in order to feel that supervision and your supervisor are available, stable and predictable?

The practice educator may guide or prompt the student by talking about the chair needing to have four legs firmly on the ground; it needs to feel strong, like it would hold you up if you fell down; it needs to be constant, available, in the same place and the student should know how to get to the chair. Thinking of supervision in this way, what does the student need to feel that supervision and the practice educator are available, stable and predictable? Each student's responses and needs will be different, but often discussions at the chair legs stage may be connected to the following aspects of supervision:

- protected time;
- scheduled in the diary;
- in the same location;
- on time;
- knowing who will send the joining link for virtual supervision;
- who will book a room if supervision is in person;
- how long the session will last;
- what will happen if the session is cancelled;
- what your agreed supervision structure will look like;
- what preparation is expected.

All of these elements and more help **The Supervision Chair** feel stable and predictable.



IMAGE 1.1B: 2. Chair seat – What do we need to know about each other so that we can sit comfortably with each other? How can we learn more about each other? How do our values, beliefs, life and work experiences, cultural similarities and differences impact on how we ‘sit’ with each other? What do we need to acknowledge in terms of the seat of power and privilege? How will we sit with and manage challenge or conflict?

The practice educator may guide or prompt the student by talking about the fact that the student and the practice educator will be sitting with each other for some time. It will be important that they can feel comfortable and sit through complex discussions with some understanding of each other. This section of the chair is a good point to discuss similarities and differences and, importantly, to schedule in further plans to expand and develop these discussions. **The Supervision Chair** shouldn't be the only time the practice educator and student have these discussions. Undertaking discussions at this point of **The Supervision Chair** sets up an expectation that discussions about power, similarity and difference are part of on-going supervision.

McCaughan et al (2018) acknowledge that discussing similarities and differences at the beginning of the supervisory relationship is vital as it supports the practice educator and student to return to these discussions throughout the practice learning opportunity. Social GRRRAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2012) is a helpful model to assist with discussions at this point. Social GRRRAACCEEESSS is a mnemonic to aid consideration of difference and similarity within relationships. In a linear form, it includes:

- gender;
- geography;
- race;
- religion;
- age;
- ability;
- appearance;
- class;
- culture;
- ethnicity;
- education;
- employment;
- sexuality;
- sexual orientation;
- spirituality.

Each element can be discussed, in terms of views, experiences, similarities and differences. Consider which elements stand out to the practice educator and the student. For example, the following five questions may be helpful to consider at this point.

1. In our supervision relationship, which Social GRRRAACCEEESSS are more visible or invisible and why?
2. Do any of our Social GRRRAACCEEESSS provide us with more power or privilege (for example, White privilege, education or employment privilege) than the other one of us? How might this impact on our supervision relationship?
3. How might we challenge each other when we notice discrimination, bias or assumption in relation to the Social GRRRAACCEEESSS?
4. Which of the Social GRRRAACCEEESSS stand out to you and why do you think that is? How might that impact on supervision for you?
5. As your practice educator, is there anything you would like me to keep in mind about your Social GRRRAACCEEESSS?

Thinking about how the student and practice educator will 'sit together comfortably' will often include some uncomfortable discussions in order to reach a comfortable point in a meaningful way. The importance of these discussions in paying attention to the early stages of the practice educator and student relationship cannot be minimised. For example, Brookfield (1995) confirms that our *cultural beliefs* are so powerful they may be more influential than our age in terms of the impact on how we learn. In addition, research by Christiansen et al (2011) also found that good supervision involved the creation of a safe space in which the supervisee could communicate and process experiences related to cultural issues.



IMAGE 1.1C: 3. Chair arms – What do you need from me as a practice educator to feel accepted, emotionally contained and supported? How will you know this is happening? How might previous experiences of supervision impact on the creation of an emotionally containing supervisory relationship?

The practice educator may guide or prompt the student by talking about supervision acting as a metaphoric hug to help the student feel emotionally held, supported and accepted. The student can think about what they need from supervision in order to achieve this sense of emotional containment (Bion, 1962). A conversation about previous supervisory experiences and what helped or hindered in terms of feeling emotionally contained and supported can be helpful. Additional questions can be used such as the following.

- If feeling emotionally contained in supervision was represented in the arms of this chair...
 - » what colour would they be?
 - » how would they feel to touch?
 - » what size would they be?
 - » how would the arms feel when you sit in the chair?
- If you feel uncontained in supervision...
 - » what might I see?
 - » how will you tell me if you need your supervision chair to feel more supportive?

Each student will have different responses, but this section of the chair is an opportunity to think about what acceptance, emotional containment and support may look and feel like to them. This is increasingly important in the world of virtual supervision and can help raise self-awareness about how empathy, kindness and respect are communicated via a computer screen.



IMAGE 1.1D: 4. Chair back – What are the ground rules that will help us to stay sitting up and paying attention to each other? What learning style or thinking styles do we prefer and how will we use these? What has helped us to keep focus in previous supervisions?