

Practice Reflection

The Cake Model: A Visual Tool to Enhance Deep Learning in Social Work Students on Field Placement

Maree Higgins & Mim Fox

Maree Higgins – Faculty Arts & Social Sciences, UNSW

Mim Fox – School of Health & Society, University of Wollongong

Address for Correspondence:

m.higgins@unsw.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Deep learning in social work field placement involves students applying multiple forms of knowledge to manage increasingly complex responsibilities in a manner consistent with professional values. Scaffolding of learning over the course of the placement facilitates deep learning by enabling the student to develop new skills by observation, discussion and risk taking supported by formative assessment processes. Regular reflection upon practice with supervisor feedback stimulates the synthesis of knowledge, skills and values and the development of a unique professional self. The outcome of this process can be likened to cake making, an analogy that offers a stimulating method of analysing and ritualising the placement schedule. At the earliest point, a placement idea is identified and formulated into an offer just as a recipe is chosen and ingredients for the cake gathered. During the selection, commencement and orientation of the student, the individual, team and organisational elements are marshalled in the same way as ingredients and implements are laid out for baking to begin. During the work phase of the placement, students are encouraged to rise to the challenges of professional practice in the same way that one combines and bakes the cake and, once proven, the outcomes of the shared labour are enjoyed in the same way that student growth is recognised and acknowledged by the professional community at the end of a placement. This article presents a model of collaborative decision making through the placement cycle that is founded upon the rich imagery of the cake analogy.

Keywords: *Social work, Field education, Pedagogy, Learning, Work integrated learning*

INTRODUCTION

This article introduces a new theoretical model, *The Cake Model*, to the landscape of teaching and learning that is the social work field placement. The cake model draws upon theories of transformative learning which have contributed to capacity and desire in social work education to individualise student learning and create meaningful opportunities for socialisation to the profession. The process of making a cake provides an analogy which offers a stimulating method of analysing and ritualising the placement schedule. At the earliest point, a placement idea is identified and formulated into an offer just as a recipe is chosen and ingredients for the cake gathered. During the selection, commencement and orientation of the student, the individual, team and organisational elements are marshalled in the same way as ingredients and implements are laid out for baking to begin. During the work phase of the placement, students are encouraged to rise to the challenges of professional practice in the same way that one combines and bakes the cake, and once proven, the outcomes of the shared labour results in a finished cake which might be enjoyed in the same way that student growth is recognised and acknowledged by the professional community at the end of a placement. The model provides a metaphor that can be used to discuss placement difficulties, such as when students and supervisors experience disappointment or issues during the placement.

Transformative learning is produced in cycles of reflection, with specific reference to real world cases which are experienced and then looked at objectively by the student individually and within supervision (Fook, 2015; Giles, Irwin, Lynch, & Waugh, 2010; Mezirow, 2000). Such learning is promoted by a suite of supervision tools such as the Stages of Placement (Cleak & Wilson, 2013), the *Three Stage Theory Model* (Collingwood, 2005), Fook's critical reflection process (2015), the *Stages of Change Model* (cited by Zuluaga, 2017) and the range of tools researched by Smith, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil (2015). The cake model is similar to Cleak and Wilson's stages of placement model, but specifically addresses the processes of learning that occur within each stage, providing a model for discussing student progress and issues during while breaking down each placement learning task into manageable components. No other supervision tool does this.

The use of metaphor as an analytic device in field work has been advocated as a method to engage with the "big picture" and specifically highlighted for its capacity to generate deep learning (Maidment, 2015). The cake model is a metaphor that clarifies the timeframe for learning in placement, focusing on both the tasks themselves and the transition from surface to deep learning, accommodating difficulties that might occur in this transition.

DEEP LEARNING

We know that surface learning is characterised by memorising and recalling information, obtaining facts, a one-way model of communication, and a low level of active student involvement in the learning process. In contrast, deep learning is characterised by making sense of new information, linking new experiences to what is already known, a higher level of active student involvement in learning including engagement in relationships which promote different views on stimulus from practice, and interactive methods of teaching including group discussions, simulations, demonstrations and practice (Cleak & Wilson,

2013). Models of deep learning in social work acknowledge that practitioners and their students are required to draw upon multiple forms of knowledge in their everyday responses to vulnerable individuals, couples, families, groups and communities. Reaching a graduate standard of ability requires deconstruction of complex placement tasks in iterative cycles (Collingwood, 2005; Giles et al., 2010).

Social work field education programs have key milestones in common, expectations and hurdles associated with placement learning. In Australia, student engagement in placement preparation begins between six and 12 months before placement commencement, and reflection upon their experience might continue well after the placement has ended (Cleak & Wilson, 2013). The available literature discusses the transition from surface to deep learning (Fook, 2015; Giles et al., 2010; Mezirow, 2000), but little attention has been paid to the scaffolding of placement tasks to enhance development throughout the social work placement. Similarly the scheduling of inputs and resources, with attention to the difficulties that might occur in the learning process, is not reflected in the literature. The cake model was developed to address the gap in practice wisdom relating to learning timelines, scaffolding of tasks and tailoring the learning to fit the context. It was also developed to provide a useful metaphor for dialogue when things go wrong in placement.

The placement experience as a whole

The cake model represents the placement experience as a whole. It depicts the entire range of tasks available, and suggests the interconnections between knowledge, skills and values in these tasks. Potential ways of tailoring learning to individual students might be represented by hundreds and thousands, chocolate sprinkles, marzipan or perhaps a cherry on top of the cake. Contextual factors that shape the placement experience might be represented by the size, shape, design, elaborateness and flavour of the cake. Consider the difference, for example, between a layer cake and a marble cake, where knowledge, skills and values are clearly demarcated in the first example and embedded in each task in the second. Figure 1 depicts the whole cake. This can be used with students to talk about how to tailor the learning to their particular needs and goals, and also how to make the most out of the possibilities and limitations of the agency context.

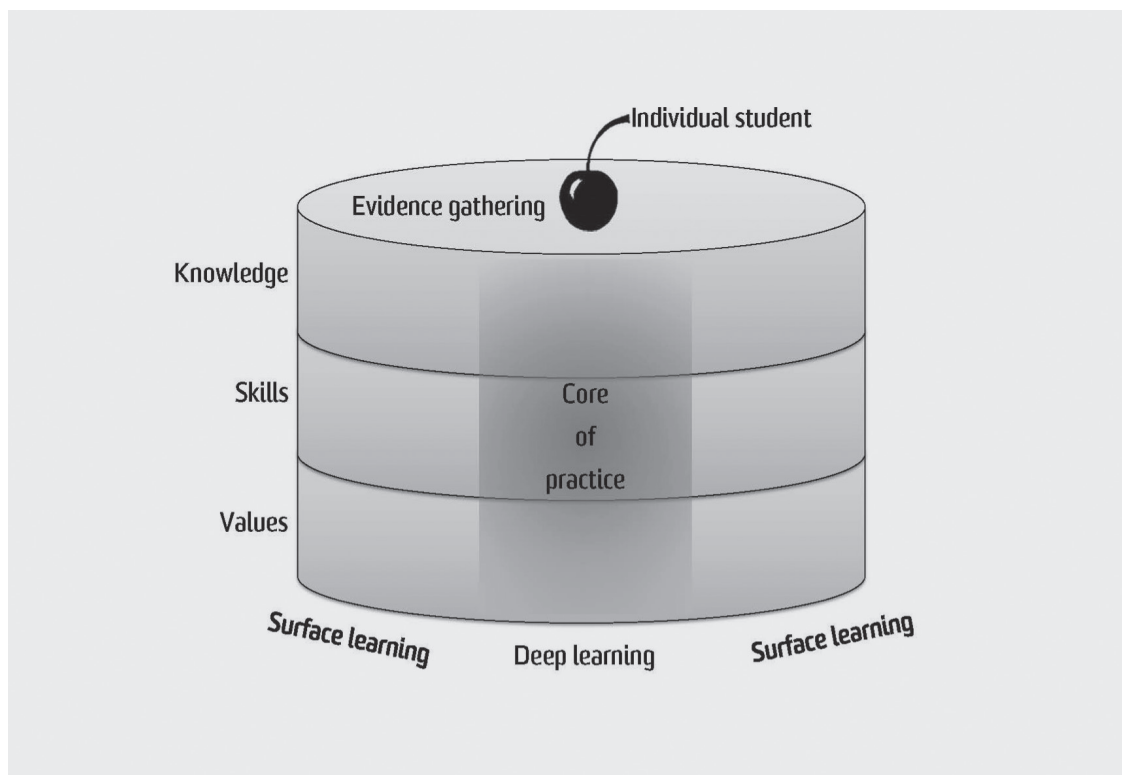


Figure 1. The Cake Model: The whole cake

DECONSTRUCTING LEARNING

The slice of cake in the cake model is a metaphor for deconstructing learning. It depicts student transitions from surface to deep learning, task by task. The outside of each slice of cake is a metaphor for the necessary surface learning, where memorising and recalling of information must occur. A student who refuses to read policies or procedures, or who cannot identify theories in the early weeks, could be presented with the analogy of avoiding the “icing” on the cake, or the crust, to their detriment. The inside of the cake is a metaphor for deep learning, where students grow in their confidence to apply their knowledge, skills and values flexibly and appropriately in new situations. This more intensely flavoured and moist part of the cake is made available gradually by virtue of earlier learning experiences, shaped by formative assessment. Each slice of the whole cake represents a distinct placement task, and progress can be linked to key placement milestones. Complex tasks, such as casework, can be broken down into component parts, such as rapport-building, applying an assessment framework, demonstrating empathy, formulating an intervention and so on. In this way, the student gains an appreciation of the range of knowledge, skills and values that combine to enable effective casework. Similar deconstruction can occur with macro tasks such as policy work, community work and research.

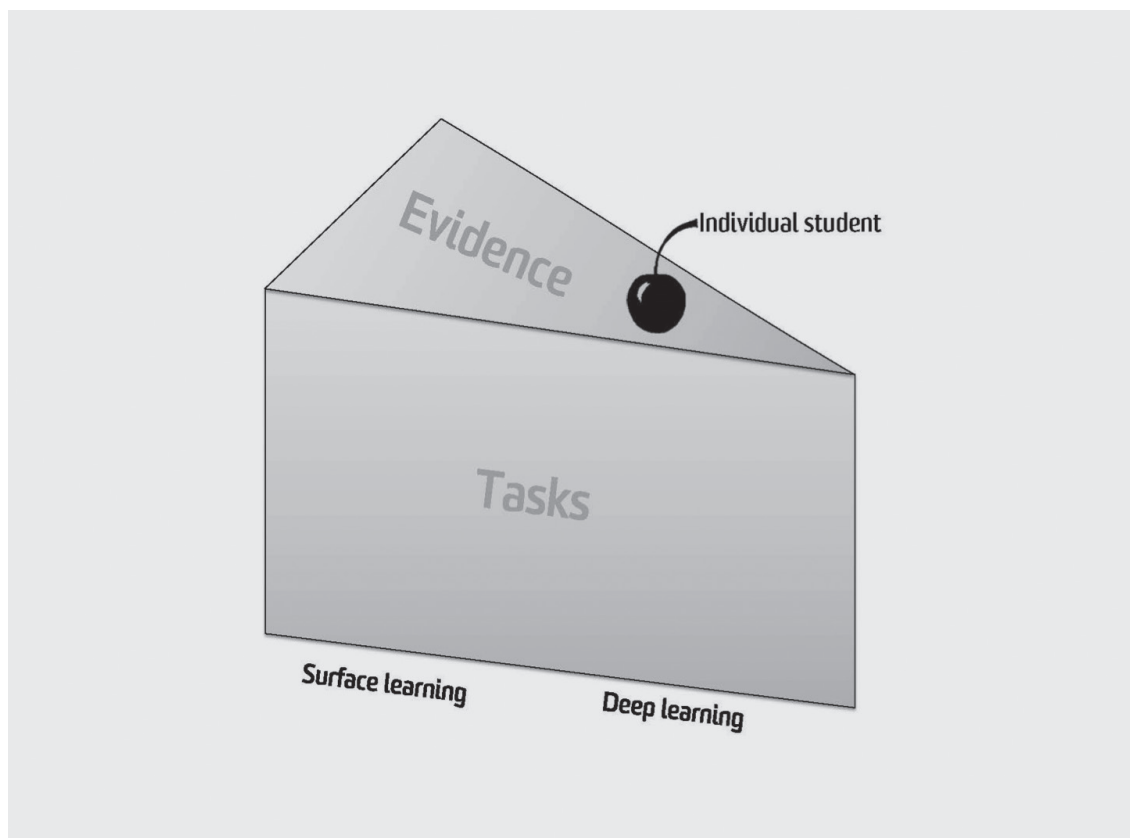


Figure 2. The Cake Model: A slice of cake

SCAFFOLDING PLACEMENT LEARNING

Finally, the cake metaphor can provide a model for the scaffolding of learning. By attending to the stages of cake making, from obtaining a recipe to assembling ingredients, preparing the cake mix, putting the cake in the oven, icing the cake and serving it out, the whole journey of student socialisation to the profession in fieldwork can be considered.

The placement preparation and orientation phase, which begins up to 12 months prior to placement, is depicted in the cake model as the stage in which a recipe is chosen and the ingredients are assembled. The “recipe” might include the initial placement offer and university discussions with students and organisations in preparation for placement allocation. The assembling of ingredients includes marshalling agency and student resources and identifying strengths, teaching styles and learning goals. Critical reflection upon emerging gaps or concerns within a student or agency might identify missing ingredients or the need to modify the recipe to progress to the “baking” stage.

The work phase of placement is depicted in the cake model as the stage in which the cake mix is prepared and the cake is baked. Tools for this phase include the learning contract and mid-placement report as well as the learning activities provided by Smith et al. (2015) to which we referred in the introduction, for example, orientation to agency service delivery protocols, having practice observed and reading relevant material. These learning activities and the placement assessment tools are like the whisk, the pan, the oven mitts, and the oven which support progression from surface to deep learning. Student and supervisor might follow the recipe exactly, or adjust as needed, adding more salt, aerating more or less,

using different equipment and adjusting the temperature of the oven accordingly. Note that placement progress utilising this metaphor is intersectional; it is affected by many factors including the “ingredients” (the people and resources), the tools utilised in the process (learning activities), and external factors such as the weather (for example, agency politics and funding conditions).

The end phase of placement is depicted in the cake model as the finalised cake. In the last few weeks of placement student achievements are acknowledged via increasing autonomy, supervisor feedback, and in the end-placement report. Student progress reaches the summative assessment point. Agencies begin to adjust to the impending absence of the student, and students return to their studies and/or begin job-seeking. They may perceive that their placement has been tailored to their learning goals by seeing the cake as a whole, via the metaphor of the “cherry on the top of the cake.” Alternately, student and supervisor might perceive that learning has been affected by numerous factors, by noting dryness, crumbling or the failure to rise. The cake metaphor can stimulate conversations in these situations about what went wrong and what could be done in future to avoid poor baking outcomes.

The authors have developed numerous case studies with students and supervisors utilising the cake model. In order to demonstrate the application of the model we now present a case study.

BREAKFAST CLUB CASE STUDY

Viv is a social worker from a non-government organisation that works with children and families. She loves having students, and wants to get them up and running quickly. She always gets them to attend the Breakfast Club in their first few weeks on placement because she knows it's such a great way of getting to know the kids, and – more importantly – the kids getting to know them. Over time she notices that most students seem to struggle to connect what they do in the Breakfast Club with “real social work.” The students who engage more quickly and seem to enjoy the work are usually the more outgoing ones, and she's starting to think that students really need a high level of confidence to undertake her placement.

The placement experience as a whole

Using the cake model, Viv takes a step back in the pre-placement and orientation phases with her next students. She maps the practice knowledge she usually draws upon automatically, such as what it means to be a mandatory reporter, how domestic violence and trauma affects development and how to build rapport with the kids. She reflects that engaging in the Breakfast Club may look simple to some students at first, but others find the experience boring, bewildering, confronting or even upsetting. She considers how important the Breakfast Club is to building relationships with the kids, developing insight about the needs and experiences of the families who come to the agency, and students demonstrating the capacity to critically reflect and respond appropriately. She formulates a plan to explain the importance of this early task to the whole placement experience.

Deconstructing learning

Viv takes two students and in their first supervision session Viv outlines the cake model and explains that the task of the Breakfast Club is one piece of the large “cake” of the placement.

She asks her students to focus on the outside of the slice of cake, reading the agency's policy on mandatory reporting in preparation for their first Breakfast Club session, and paying attention to their initial feelings, experiences and thoughts while at the Breakfast Club. They contract to record details in their journal and discuss these in their next supervision.

Scaffolding learning

As the student's week progresses, Viv asks them to observe the kids and raise any wellbeing or potential risk issues with her if they come up in the Breakfast Club. By week 3, she notices that one student is really good at speaking with the kids but that the other student is having trouble engaging. Focusing on skill development, she asks both students to observe other staff and identify skills they are drawing upon while at the Breakfast Club, then to read an article and role play the skills they wish to develop further in the context. For one student this involves looking at the stages of change (Zuluaga, 2017) to determine how they might be discussed with kids with anger management issues. For the other, it involves practising rapport building and reading about Erikson's stages of development (Erikson, 1963) to more deeply understand the developmental needs of the kids who come to Breakfast Club. They each present theory findings in their shared supervision session and role play communicating with the kids in line with their learning.

Viv finds the students are more curious and focused on the social work practice content of the Breakfast Club tasks than in previous years, and more aware of the connection of the task to their professional role. In week four, when a kid has an angry outburst the Breakfast Club, her students are able to identify it as a risk issue, de-escalate the situation, report it to her, and discuss the deeper meanings, possible causes, and potential interventions in supervision. This gives her confidence that they may be ready to carry more responsibility in other areas of the program.

In this example, the cake model demonstrates how the supervisor utilises different learning approaches with each student, deconstructs placement tasks for them, and builds up of a variety of forms of evidence through the combination of immersion, reflective writing, reading and discussion in supervision.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have described the cake model, a tool to support scaffolding of learning in social work field placements. It contributes to the literature addressing transformative learning by providing a metaphor to understand and structure the timeline of the placement. Deep learning can occur at any point in the placement and is often experienced differently by individual students. The cake model allows supervisors to thoughtfully combine tasks, theory and reflection on learning to create a real world experience that is flexible around student learning styles, agency policies and limitations, and perceptions of students and supervisors about progress. The process of making a cake provides an analogy which offers a method of analysing and ritualising the placement schedule. By using this model it is possible to build a shared understanding of the purpose of learning tasks through ongoing dialogue between supervisor and student throughout the placement. This tool can be used to inform both formative and summative assessment and enables consideration of, and responsiveness to, many of the variables that shape the transformative learning journey. The model provides a new metaphor about transformational learning that can be used to portray the range of opportunities in the placement, break down tasks

into smaller learning components, provide structure in the learning process and discuss placement difficulties.

Acknowledgement:

The authors would like to acknowledge Sabrina Tyler (UNSW Sydney) for her graphic design contribution.

References

- Cleak, H., & Wilson, J. (2013). *Making the most of field placement* (3rd ed.). South Melbourne, VIC: Cengage Learning.
- Collingwood, P. (2005). Integrating theory and practice. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 6(1), 6–23.
- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Youth: Change and challenge*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Fook, J. (2015). Reflective practice and critical reflection. In J. Lishman (Ed.), *Handbook for practice learning in social work and social care* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Giles, R., Irwin, J., Lynch, D., & Waugh, F. (2010). *In the field: From learning to practice*. South Melbourne, VIC: Oxford University Press.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives in a theory in progress*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith, D., Cleak, H., & Vreugdenhil, A. (2015). "What are they really doing?" An exploration of student learning activities in field placement. *Australian Social Work*, 68(4), 515–531. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2014.960433
- Zuluaga, M. (2017). The stages of change: A model for social work students in field placement. *The New Social Worker* (Winter), 1–2.