This is an interesting exercise, to lay down some ideas about advanced practice in social work, prompted by the first question I heard myself asking – well, just what is advanced social work practice? For a moment I felt flummoxed, and then ridiculously foolish for feeling flummoxed. After all, I have practised as a social worker for 36 years, supervised social workers for 24 years, and taught undergraduate and (post-qualifying) postgraduate social work for 20 years. And then I laughed, remembering that when I am asked the question ‘what is social work’, I always have that same moment of feeling flummoxed, before I take a breath and usually say something that is part textbook/catechism, part commentary, and part passion/commitment.

The moment of feeling flummoxed is not surprising. From one angle, social work as a profession could be defined by (and it is paradoxically both weakened and strengthened by) the sheer breadth of what counts as social work activities and the diversity of contexts of social work practice. This flows on to challenges for the development of social work practice theories, and to what one might choose to include in the ambit of ‘knowledge for social work’. Of course, it also flows on to how one might think about what constitutes advanced social work practice. There are clear orientation points in all the familiar definitions of social work\(^1\) - enhancing the well-being and the potentials of individuals, groups and communities; central commitments to social justice and social change; and knowledge and practice directed toward the interface of people in their environments. Definitional representations

---

\(^1\) See the definitions on the websites of the Australian Association of Social Workers and the International Federation of Social Workers.
What is advanced social work practice?  

Associate Professor Carmel Flaskas

of social work practice are necessarily generic. Given the realness of the breadth and diversity of social work practices and contexts, there is no alternative but to forgive the gap between the abstractness (and perhaps the comparative sterility) of generic definitional descriptions when held against the richness, diversity and specificity of everyday social work practice. This same gap will be echoed again in any definitions we come up with about advanced social work practice.

Advanced social work practice is not just about ‘more experienced’ or even ‘better’ social work practice. As an opening gambit, I would say that we bother delineating advanced social work practice to draw attention to the kind of practice that is able to ‘meet’ and ‘hold’ greater complexity. Advanced practice in social policy will look very different to advanced practice in a child protection assessment service, will look very different to advanced practice in couple and family therapy counselling services, will look very different to advanced practice in working with traumatised refugee communities, will look very different to advanced practice in hospital oncology settings. So let me put ‘nutshell’ definitions to one side for the moment, and just say some things about what I have in my head about aspects of advanced practice.

Knowledge:

I think we have come to the end of the project of trying to build a generic universal social work knowledge ‘base’. Social work practice requires a flexible constellation of knowledge, and social work training is all about providing a beginning map of the breadth of this constellation. An important message in social work education is that any particular area of social work practice will require a particular constellation of knowledge, some of it produced within social work, some it produced by social workers working in interdisciplinary contexts of knowledge and practice, and much of it produced ‘outside’ social work. The particularity of a constellation of knowledge does not come served ‘on a plate’: so one thing that marks advanced practice is the way in which the practitioner actively assembles a specific and multi-layered knowledge constellation in meeting the complexity of her/his work. And I would like to add ‘and has an orientation to practice-based research and research-informed practice that goes well beyond the confines of the parameters of the evidence-based
What is advanced social work practice? 

Associate Professor Carmel Flaskas

practice research program’ - but I fear this might be going over the top, though I would hope that it is not.

Skills:
Skills of course are part of knowledge, but I will use a separate heading, if only to reinforce the obvious: that practice is about ‘doing’ and not just how you think about the ‘doing’. Doing and thinking-about-doing go hand-in-hand in advanced practice, along with a capacity to be able to say in words of two syllables (to our clients, to our colleagues, to funding bodies) what you think you are doing, why you are doing it, and what you think will be the effects of the ‘doing’. Knowledge about skills can be developed at arms-length, but skills are only developed in the doing of practice. Advanced social work practice, regardless of context, requires a skills repertoire that has both breadth and depth, but again it is the context and specificity of the practice that will most strongly shape the practitioner’s development of an advanced repertoire of skills. While experience does not guarantee the development of a sophisticated repertoire of skills, you cannot build a sophisticated repertoire of skills without experience.

Advocating/insisting/creating the space for (advanced) social work practice:
This heading may depart from textbook lists, and is probably a bit hard to wind into formal accounts of what constitutes advanced social work practice. Yet if I step back from what is written, and become curious about what I have in my head when I think ‘that person is a terrific social worker’, it is often about admiring the way in which someone has managed to advocate/insist/create-the-space-for an advanced social work practice in an environment which may be indifferent, or even hostile, to advanced social work practice. The social work role often sits on the edge of the ‘main game’ of organisational contexts, and indeed social workers often have a different idea of their role to the colleagues they work with, who (as you would expect) tend to see and understand just that part of the social work role that directly affects their own work most. It seems to me that social workers who ‘do’ advanced practice, for example in health settings, often are skilled in creating the space for (and showing the value of) this level of contribution to their service.
What is advanced social work practice?  
Associate Professor Carmel Flaskas

Positioning of self, reflexivity and reflective practice:
Regardless of context of practice, advanced social work practice ‘shows’ the practitioner’s greater capacity for a flexible use of self, for reflexivity, and for a more autonomous and independent reflective practice. The process of reflective practice is at the centre of all social work practice, and indeed all practice disciplines. Reflexivity is specifically about the capacity of practitioners to factor themselves into their reflection on their own practice. It requires nurturing the capacity to be aware of the relationship between your own position (in an organization, as part of a policy team, in your work with clients) and the shape and process of the work, and to reflect on the usefulness and effects of this positioning of self. More complex areas and types of practice require a more developed capacity to do this. The precise form and types of reflection and reflexivity is dependent on the context of practice.

Ethical fluency:
Ethical fluency in my mind connects to positioning of self and reflective practice. All social workers should be aware of, and orient their practice toward, the code of ethics of social work and they should be able to identify the ethical tensions and ethical vulnerabilities that their particular area of practice throws up. What I am calling ‘ethical fluency’ comes more with the territory of advanced social work practice. I think it is developed through the combination of experience in navigating ethical tensions, a more developed knowledge constellation emerging from (and being brought to bear on) the work within a particular practice context, and a more developed reflexive use of self.

I have reached the end of the list of aspects of advanced practice that came to my mind. Would I attempt a definition, just off my own bat, when formal definitions are a product of consensus agreements? Probably not, but I am happy enough to contribute this description as part of the discussion: Precisely what constitutes advanced social work practice is hard to capture generically, for the very nature of advanced social work practice is that it is formed by, and meets, complexity - and the nature of that complexity is generated always in the particularity of practice context. Advanced social work practice both shapes and calls on a (particular) constellation of knowledge as well as a (particular) skills repertoire that has both
What is advanced social work practice?  

Associate Professor Carmel Flaskas

breadth and depth. In many contexts of practice, advanced social work practitioners are adept at creating the space for the use of their knowledge and skills, and showing the value of this service contribution. Because advanced social work practice is related to the needs of complex practice, practitioners have greater capacity for a flexible use of self, for reflexivity, and for a more autonomous and independent reflective practice, and ethical fluency is part of this territory.

But some things still nag at me. One is simply that I haven’t answered the question of criteria for recognition and measurement. But the other important issue, which will no doubt be part of a broader discussion generated by the advent of the ACSW, is how one draws the boundary of what constitutes (distinctive) advanced social work practice given how porous the borders of interdisciplinarity become in many specialised areas of practice. I imagine that we will have different opinions about this, and not the least for important ‘protective’ political reasons. However, I am inclined to think that the core of social work practice - advanced or not, and common to the diversity of practice contexts - is the commitment to contextual understandings of people’s lives and lived experience. Social work practice is ‘about’ the relationship of context to personal, family, community and broader layers of social experience, and it generates knowledge, skills and services within these parameters, and within the parameters of a political and ethical commitment to social justice. Of course, social workers are not the only people who are interested in and/or committed to these parameters, which is why I can’t understand why we need shy off points of interdisciplinarity. However, we are the only profession that is marked out by these commitments, which cohere the diversity of social work practice, including advanced social work practice.

But at the end of page 5, and a few hundred words over the ‘limit’, I’ll stop here.

Carmel Flaskas 2011