Creating opportunities for interdisciplinary service learning that cuts across teaching and research (Badat 2013) and promotes community development (Bridger & Alter 2007) enables higher education institutions to contribute in relevant ways to society (Bossio et al. 2014; Harris 2010; Plank et al. 2011). Practices that encourage interdisciplinary collaboration between university students help to strengthen community-based engagement with affordances both for the university and the learning site. At the level of the university, interdisciplinary collaboration creates opportunities for shifting student professional practice, and for academic staff to explore ways in which new practices might inform curriculum transformation. At the learning site, interdisciplinary collaboration strengthens students’ capacity to engage more effectively in service learning that is responsive to the context, while at the same time exposing role players within the community to new practices.

This chapter examines the process of building interdisciplinary service learning as an emerging practice through the Schools Improvement Initiative (SII). By presenting a contextual and reflective approach, we explore how interdisciplinary service learning between university students from the Faculty of Health Sciences generates new possibilities for transforming practices within both the university and the SII partner schools in which the students undertook their professional learning. In many ways, the focus of this chapter on critical service learning and interdisciplinarity provides a central point for the other chapters in this volume, as it is through these forms of learning that new insights were developed, conceptualised and ultimately practised.

The intention to spotlight interdisciplinarity from the perspective of the university students and academic staff members was deliberate. This illustrates the SII’s focus on building alternative approaches to knowledge generation, which – for the main – are still in their conceptual stages. We wished to explore the possibilities and opportunities that arise through engaging in interdisciplinary practices, the extent to which these practices become possible in a university–school partnership, and – ultimately – the influence this has on the academy and school. The conceptual mapping that is presented in this chapter forms a backdrop to Chapters 11 (Abrahams et al.) and 12 (Gretschel et al.) in which various forms of interdisciplinary practices between students are further examined within their specific disciplines.

The notion of interdisciplinarity, as used in this study, refers to the process of active interprofessional collaboration between two or more disciplines (Bossio et al. 2014; Harris 2010; Holley 2009). Moving away from the more traditional pluralist...
approaches applied in health sciences, in which professional disciplines work in parallel to address a particular problem (Bossio et al. 2014), the interdisciplinary perspective we present in this chapter, and in the publication generally, is based on discipline-specific insights and expertise that are drawn on to generate new knowledge and understanding, and are applicable to a particular context. This implies a commitment by disciplines to work towards developing a conceptual synthesis (Van Leeuen 2005).

Service learning represents a response by students undertaking their professional learning to address particular social issues through interdisciplinary collaboration. This requires the development of ‘new conceptual strategies to find unity in methodological approach[es] between disciplines’ (Lattuca 2001: 11). Both service learning and professional learning (elaborated below) are thus viewed through the theoretical lens of interdisciplinary collaboration, as defined here. It is against this framework that the study sought to address the following questions:

- What are the insights gained from interdisciplinary service learning for student practice?
- How can interdisciplinary service learning located within a university–school partnership inform new knowledge at the level of the university?

**Interdisciplinarity: A review of the literature**

Given the plethora and scope of scholarship on interdisciplinary collaboration, we confine the literature review to studies located in the field of health education conducted mostly within the last fifteen years. Within this selection there has been much interest, both internationally and locally, on the positive benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration (Ansari et al. 2004; Infante 2012); as well as its challenges and impediments (Ansari & Phillips 2001). Much of this scholarship focuses on institutional impacts and curricular enhancements (Brown et al. 2003; Harris 2010), and on facilitating teamwork amongst students from a range of disciplines (Cahill et al. 2013; Infante 2012). These authors – as well as Bezuidenhout et al. (2015), Luke et al. (2009) and others – strongly recommend a collaborative approach in the learning and teaching of students and health-care professionals, emphasising in particular the role of collaboration in promoting education research within the health professions.

Bezuidenhout et al. (2015) emphasise the need for establishing new relevance through collaboration, and recognise that the development of a shared knowledge base requires a collaborative approach to generate new areas of inquiry (Harris 2010). While a number of studies have explored the conceptualisation and influence of interdisciplinary collaboration (Klein 1990; Lattuca 2001; Rhoten 2004; Zuber-Skerritt 1990), fewer have focused on the process as well as the factors that enable interdisciplinary engagement. Similarly, there is less available research that considers the complexities of disrupting traditional disciplinary frameworks (Bossio et al.
2014) in favour of an interdisciplinary approach. As a reflective case study, Bossio et al. (2014) offer useful insights into the often complex and nuanced processes of building interdisciplinary practice through action research. However, their study focuses specifically on the reflections of academic staff members in forming an interdisciplinary research group to inform innovative learning and teaching practice.

While many of the theoretical approaches to interdisciplinary collaboration are useful in defining this area of research, there has been no study to date that examines the experiences of both academic staff and their students in developing an interdisciplinary approach to service learning through action research. Nor has there been any study that frames this approach as part of an existing university–school partnership within the South African context. The implications of this study being nested within a university–school partnership are significant for two reasons: firstly, the notion of interdisciplinary collaboration is extended beyond the interaction between the students and academic staff to involve key role players within the school such as the principal and teachers. Secondly, the university–school partnership (explained below) calls for context (Bossio et al. 2014; Lattuca 2001) as a critical driver in informing the interdisciplinary approach to service learning, and to the types of service learning initiatives appropriate within the particular school. The significance of these implications is explored in more depth in this chapter.

**Service learning within the SII: Potential for interdisciplinary practice**

Through the process of engaged scholarship that focuses on learning in – and through – context, the SII seeks to provide opportunities for improving teaching and learning. At the same time, this process provides sites for UCT students to enhance their professional learning experience. This is enacted through the collaboration between the SII and the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT, enabling students from the occupational therapy and speech- and language therapy professions to undertake their practice learning in the SII partner schools.

The form of interdisciplinary practice discussed in this chapter constitutes the service learning component of each of the occupational therapy and speech- and language therapy curricula. As used in the context of this study, service learning refers to a form of engaged scholarship that is

- a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students
- participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and
- reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (Bringle et al. 2006: 12)

Underpinning the service-learning imperative is a commitment to educating prospective health practitioners in South Africa in ways that explore ‘new methods
of practice education and theories of practice, as these evolve as students work with marginalized groups of people’ (Duncan & Alsop 2006: 11).

The service-learning aspect of the curriculum, as undertaken at Intshayelelo Primary (see Chapter 3, Clark & Mbobo), is incorporated into the credit-bearing component of the fourth-year occupational therapy and speech- and language therapy academic programmes. Occupational therapy students complete placements that align with two different practice domains: community development practice (CDP) and child learning, development and play (CLDP) – both of which are established practice domains within the curriculum. In the case of speech- and language therapy, on the other hand (as highlighted by Abrahams et al. in Chapter 11), CDP constitutes a practice domain that is in the early process of being actualised. It is important to acknowledge, therefore, that the two professional disciplines are at different stages in the implementation of CDP as part of their academic programmes. However, both intentionally place students at Intshayelelo every year for the purpose of building interdisciplinary practices between them.

In January 2013 four fourth-year occupational therapy students (two from CDP and CLDP respectively) were placed at Intshayelelo Primary to undertake their final-year service-learning placements. In mid-2014 three final-year speech- and language therapy students were placed at the same site. The group of seven students spent four days every week at the school for their seven-week block. This placement was repeated in 2015 with between seven and nine students being placed at the school for three consecutive blocks during the course of the year. The placements were facilitated through the guidance and supervision of university clinical educators in each of the above-mentioned divisions and disciplines. In addition to the clinical educators, occupational therapy and speech- and language therapy academic staff members played an integral role in conceptualising the practice that has come to constitute the school-based service learning at this school.

In both occupational therapy and speech- and language therapy, the health professionals’ approach to – and conceptualisation of – their contributions extends beyond the curative modes of delivery, offering instead a more nuanced, context-driven view of the possible contributions to health through teaching and learning. A brief explanation of the specific domains of practice follows, illustrating how the practices within the above-mentioned disciplines have informed the approach to service learning within the SII.

**Occupational therapy: Community development practice**

The practice of CDP focuses on initiating processes of change that address the reproduced, hegemonic nature of occupations (Galvaan & Peters 2013). The notion of ‘occupation’ refers here to activities that take up a person’s resources and time (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapy 2002), and that may be meaningful and purposeful. These occupations are co-constructed through
transactional relationships in context, and may reproduce patterns of being and doing in communities (Galvaan 2015). For example, the way that children engage in learning in certain contexts may reproduce intergenerational patterns of teaching and learning in schools (see Chapter 8, Peters & Galvaan). CDP students would therefore be encouraged to intervene in everyday patterns of participation in ways that nurture more liberated forms of occupational engagement. This will be explained in subsequent sections in this chapter.

**Occupational therapy: Child learning, development and play**

The domain of CLDP focuses on children's development in play and learning, but this particular domain of practice has traditionally taken a more clinical approach through direct or indirect services and consultation (Bundy 1995). More recently, CLDP practice, such as that initiated in the SII partner school referred to in this chapter and in Chapter 12 of this publication (Gretschel et al.), has begun to address barriers to children's learning, development and play through considering how children engage as occupational beings in their contexts.

**Speech- and language therapy**

Historically, speech- and language therapy in community settings has also assumed a medical approach, focusing on preventing communication disorders. More recent efforts to re-orientate this practice have focused on communication more broadly, creating opportunities to develop new modes of practice that address communication needs in communities (Kathard & Moonsamy 2015). Communication here is regarded as a resource for building capacity and realising human potential (see Chapter 11, Abrahams et al.). In as much as communication is critical to learning, speech- and language therapists have 'a key role in contributing to human development through their work in communication' (Kathard & Moonsamy 2015: 6).

**Service learning in context**

Each of the above professions views service learning as an opportunity for innovation both in their practice and curricula. In this regard they are at the forefront of developing new modes of practice within their disciplines (Galvaan et al. 2015; Kathard & Moonsamy 2015). With a strong emphasis on responding to the school's needs, and drawing on institutional resources and expertise (Harkavy & Hartley 2012), service learning has involved various initiatives facilitated by the university students in collaboration with a range of role players within the school. One example pertinent to this study (see also Chapter 10, Galvaan & Silbert) is the peer-based after-school homework programme (hereafter referred to as the ‘after-school homework programme’). This initiative demonstrates a way in which service learning was set up to respond to the community's needs, and offers an example of a project in which students engaged in interdisciplinary collaboration.
The after-school homework programme was informed by the school’s concerns that the literacy and numeracy results of Grade 6 pupils were below par. Teachers identified a number of contextual barriers limiting children’s ability to complete their homework including, for example, parents not having the necessary skills to assist their children due to their own level of education (Howie et al. 2012). The principal and teachers therefore expressed the need for extra homework support for learners, determining that the absence of homework practices severely impacted on teaching and learning.

In January 2014, in response to discussions with the principal and Grade 6 teachers, the occupational therapy clinical educator and students conceptualised the after-school homework programme. This programme involved Grade 11 learners from a neighbouring SII partner school who would provide homework mentoring to Grade 6 learners at their primary school under the supervision of their teachers.

All Grade 6 learners were involved in the one-hour after-school homework programme that took place twice a week. This amounted to 160 learners attending each session. Twenty-five Grade 11 mentors were identified from the secondary school, which is located a few hundred metres away from the primary school. During the homework sessions, learners were divided into small groups of between six and eight, and each group was assigned a Grade 11 homework mentor. Rather than focus on content knowledge, mentors addressed specific difficulties relating to the homework tasks assigned on that particular day. In each of the two schools a teacher coordinator was responsible for the coordination and management of the programme. The homework programme was supervised by the Grade 6 teachers according to a schedule that had been drawn up by the coordinator.

As briefly outlined above, the after-school homework programme constituted multiple components, with implications for both the Grade 6 learners and the Grade 11 mentors. Involving older learners from the same community created opportunities for relationships of trust and mentorship to be established. A year after its implementation by the occupational therapy CDP students, the speech- and language therapy students and occupational therapy CLDP students also became involved in the programme. This collaborative engagement emerged after the Grade 11 mentors articulated the need for skills development, especially in the area of communication. In response to this need, the speech- and language therapy students introduced weekly mentorship capacitation sessions during which skills were offered in areas such as leadership, mentorship and communication. In view of communication underpinning speech- and language therapy practice, the potential existed for students from this discipline to contribute their disciplinary expertise to the programme. Additionally, in the half-hour sessions prior to the start of the homework programme, the CLDP students introduced additional play activities for the Grade 6 learners. The after-school homework programme thus came to represent a service learning project in which students from across a range of disciplines could contribute their professional knowledge through interdisciplinary collaboration.
PARTNERSHIPS IN ACTION

It is against this background that the chapter examines processes of interdisciplinary collaboration, and their implications for strengthening student practice learning in the SII partner schools.

**Methodology**

An action research methodology was used. This was characterised by two cycles of action followed by critical reflection by participants on changes in practice, and on creating knowledge through action (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000; Koshy et al. 2010; Meyer 2000). Through action research, insight was gained into the process of interdisciplinary engagement as an emerging practice at the partner school.

Five groups of participants were involved in the study:

- A group of five academic staff members including lecturers and clinical educators from the divisions of occupational therapy and speech- and language therapy.
- SII project manager.
- School principal.
- The SII health and community development coordinator (whose role was to support the students in coordinating their programmes across the disciplines).
- Fourth-year occupational therapy and speech- and language therapy students.

The methods used to collect data from the academic staff members, the SII project manager and the SII health and community development coordinator were four focus group discussions – one held at the end of 2014, and three during 2015. Data was collected from the health science students during planned Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987) sessions that took place at the beginning and end of each of the seven-week block placements. The purpose of Appreciative Inquiry was to strengthen cohesion by creating a stronger sense of meaning and group membership (Bushe 2013). Appreciative Inquiry provided an opportunity for students to work together, and to reflect on ways in which they could generate new collaborative practices. Data was also collected from the students through written feedback submitted at the end of each block.

An interpretive, thematic approach was used to analyse how participants’ reflections fed into and shaped ongoing engagement at the school, and the ways in which reflections by participants informed practice. Accuracy and credibility of research findings were enhanced by repetition of the action-reflection cycle, prolonged engagement with the issues, polyangulation of data, and member checking (Mertler 2012). Truth value was sought by incorporating multiple sources of data from different role players (Stemler 2001).

Ethics approval was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities and Faculty of Health Sciences research ethics committees, in accordance with ethical principles from both faculties. Participants gave their informed consent prior to participating in the study.
Discussion

This section is organised according to the two cycles of action research. In the first cycle we offer reflections by academic staff members captured during the focus group discussion held at the end of 2014, marking the end of the first year of interdisciplinary student placement. To this we add reflections from the principal at the SII partner school in which the students were placed.

The discussion then shifts to the second action research cycle (February to December 2015) in which we present the reflections from the Appreciative Inquiry and post-block reflection sessions. We include input from the SII health and community development coordinator, who was appointed in January 2015. These insights are considered in relation to the emergent activities that took shape within the practice learning placement blocks. Through each of the two cycles we highlight the extent to which context impacts on the process of service learning, and how – in view of this – the interdisciplinary interface developed.


In December 2014, the academic staff members, clinical educators and SII project manager held a focus group discussion to reflect on their practice over the course of the year with a view to strengthening the professional learning experience in 2015. Reflection on practice by the different role players was important in initiating interdisciplinary collaboration at the level of the staff, and constituted a key factor in the action research process. This was particularly necessary in the light of 2014 being the first year in which speech- and language therapy students had been placed in the same site as the occupational therapy students, and indeed the first time that the speech- and language therapy students were engaging in CDP.

The speech- and language therapy lecturer reflects on this new challenge, recognising the importance of naming this new way of working:

For the students and myself, I think it was the first time that we’d been in a situation where we were challenged with a really different practice where we were all finding our feet – and so I think that was a real positive. For me it was quite significant because I think then it gave us the common ground because occupational therapy was working with community development, and we started working in a similar frame. So that started to generate new ways of working and thinking.

The naming of the practice as ‘community development’, and the commensurate shift in discourse signalled new ways of working and thinking in speech- and language therapy, and new opportunities for collaboration for the disciplines.

The challenge of developing new ways of practising, however, required additional effort and investment at an organisational level. Difficulties relating to timetabling,
allocation of placements, and curriculum impact have been cited in the literature as obstacles to interdisciplinary collaboration (Cahill et al. 2013; Nisbet et al. 2008). However, the speech- and language therapy lecturer regards these challenges as inevitable and, indeed, necessary in developing new practices:

The struggles of course happened in the logistics and the organisation and kind of finding a way where we could all work together. But I think that's part of … going into something new …

As Holley (2009) points out, when individuals shift their attitudes towards interdisciplinary knowledge, the impact is not only evident at the level of the individual, but more broadly at the level of the institution.

Despite these challenges, the potential to develop a collective rather than cumulative contribution to improving learning in schools was acknowledged. It was further recognised that the knowledge that might inform such practice – and the nature of the disciplinary and interdisciplinary engagement between occupational therapy in CDP and CLDP speech- and language therapy students, and the stakeholders – was as yet uncharted. The aim of building interdisciplinary collaboration within the SII was therefore based on the shared understanding by the academic staff members that new practices would be more effectively generated through closer collaboration between students working across disciplines at the same site. These new practices were necessary in order to respond to the school's needs to support positive learning practices.

However, the proposed shifts in CLDP and speech- and language therapy practice initially created ambivalence and uncertainty for the students, as suggested by the speech- and language therapy clinical educator:

They wanted me to tell them what to do. And I said 'no, I'm not telling you what to do. Think about what would be useful here' … they struggled at the beginning and then they caught it. They're like 'now we get what you're talking about … now we can see how we can practise differently, and what that means and it means that we look at systems changes rather than trying to fix the child'. And then it opened up a new way of thinking.

The struggle for students to understand what was expected of them required a relinquishing of the familiar, and a ‘freefall’ into new, as yet untested ground (Davis 2007). Despite greater strides towards collaboration, staff members agreed that tighter coordination between all the students was needed. The occupational therapy (CLDP) clinical educator elaborates:

In terms of working together, I think that after the last block I realised that there's still a lot that we need to do as clinical educators… And I realised it's going to take a lot of coordination … they're not all making the links with one another to strengthen interventions more.
In her reflections, the CLDP clinical educator likens the students’ process of ‘finding their feet’ with that of the individual disciplines when beginning their collaboration with the SII:

Like this year and for a little bit of last year we each came in and we were trying to find our own feet for our disciplines. It is interesting in the way that we each came to be part of the SII … like individual disciplines coming together … we each came in and we were trying to find our own feet for our disciplines. And then we didn’t really think about, I suppose even have the capacity to think about, how to coordinate with another discipline because we were still just checking to see what we would contribute – and how we could complement the work that we’re doing.

Such insights highlight the parallel processes of interdisciplinary collaboration and the similar struggles initially experienced at the level of both students and staff members when working across disciplines. The need (as articulated in the above extract) for tighter coordination of the students, was echoed by the school principal during an interview conducted by the authors in December 2014. Feedback by the principal and clinical educators informed new approaches to planning and coordination. Most significantly, this involved the appointment in January 2015 of an SII health and community development coordinator whose focus would be supporting students in developing service-learning projects across the disciplines. This role would require identifying points of coherence between the disciplines, and would involve coordinating the interdisciplinary projects.

What follows is a description of the second action-reflection cycle, beginning with the Appreciative Inquiry sessions that took place at the start and end of the first block. We confine our focus to the Appreciative Inquiry sessions held in the first block only, as these two sessions were similar in content and feedback to the sessions that followed in the second and third blocks so, to a large extent, they mirrored these subsequent sessions.


The initial Appreciative Inquiry session held at the start of Block One in February 2015 provided an opportunity for students to think about what it might mean to work collaboratively. During the session they identified the following objectives that they felt should underpin their practice:

- Build relationships with role players.
- Educate participants through workshops with the objective of increasing sustainability.
- Partner with key stakeholders to identify and explore available resources.
- Form relationships with clear roles and channels of communication.
- Create a communal space to share creative ideas and find ways to work with community, multi-disciplinary teams, students/colleagues and key stakeholders.
The purpose of the second Appreciative Inquiry session held at the end of the first block was for students to reflect on the effects of collaboration on their practice in relation to the above-mentioned objectives. Emerging from this discussion was that, in addition to the benefits of collaborating with each other, most of the students shared positive experiences pertaining to collaboration with teachers. As one student recounts:

We were there to tell them that they are not on our team – we are on their team – and that was the message that we tried to get across to them, and I think it really worked with that specific group of teachers. And that was … an authentic way to do things. It was something different …

Commenting on this, the speech- and language therapy lecturer acknowledges students’ improved efforts to build collaboration with each other, and with teachers:

I was in awe of what students were thinking about as they were trying to ask, ‘how do you actually establish a relationship?’ So the creative ways in which that happened and … the value of that was seen I think in the [Appreciative Inquiry] workshop that happened. So, kind of building a key process for work and being able to see how well students themselves worked through that process with each other, finding a way to be part of a community.

Suggested in the above extract is the investment of effort in establishing relationships as a way of developing mutual understanding and trust. Furthermore, as acknowledged, collaboration extends beyond interdisciplinary engagement to include the development of trust and professional engagement with stakeholders within the community.

During the Appreciative Inquiry session held at the end of the block, students were asked what personal advice they would give to the subsequent group of students to help them create their own practice learning success. One student suggests:

My advice to the students is … not to forget that your relationships are actually with each other, and very specifically with the people you are facilitating. Those are very important …

As suggested in the data, the building of relationships between the students – and between the students and teachers – provided a clear focus for planning and implementing the activities. This mirrors and extends Cahill et al.’s (2013) study on enhancing interprofessional student practice through a case-based model in which the authors report on the importance of strengthening working relationships between students from different disciplines. Over and above developing relationships between students, the above extract underscores the need to build relationships between students and role players.

The focus on building relationships in general resulted in relationships between the students being forged sooner than was previously the case. This was demonstrated
for example in their interest in learning about each other’s disciplines, and in making an effort to draw from each other’s professional knowledge. Acknowledging this, the speech- and language therapy lecturer comments that

when students started [their block], they began by working as a team with each other, and actively sought to find authentic ways of working with teachers as part of their community of practice. It was very different to the group last year, who were angry and frustrated.

The Appreciative Inquiry sessions held at the beginning and end of all three blocks provided opportunities for students to think about their practice prior to the start of their block, and to critically reflect on their experiences thereafter. These sessions allowed students to consider reflection as a tool for working in – and on – practice.

Building on the Appreciative Inquiry reflection-on-action sessions, the SII health and community development coordinator introduced weekly forums during the second and third blocks as a strategy to improve coordination and collaboration. The need for these sessions emerged during the post-block reflection, which took place after Block One, in which students and staff members observed that, although students demonstrated closer collaboration during the block, they were still struggling to conceptualise interdisciplinary practice.

The weekly forums provided a platform for students to share ideas and to reflect on practice, offering the opportunity for reflection in the midst of action (Sykes & Dean 2013). In planning for these sessions, the coordinator suggests:

We hope that interdisciplinary work will not be thought of or viewed as merely contributing to particular activities for the sake of ‘team work’, as this will limit the potential and capacity for change. Interdisciplinary collaboration is a coming together of minds, ideas and opinions expressed through generative scholarly engagement and practice. Therefore we hope that the students will have a conceptual understanding of themselves as a team primarily, and – secondly – to think of their roles according to their disciplines.

The weekly forums provided opportunities for students to engage in a shared space for communication and reflection (see Chapter 13, Silbert & Verbeek), while at the same time engaging in meaningful, contextually relevant learning. For a number of students, the weekly forums afforded them the opportunity to share their challenges, both within and across their disciplines. An occupational therapy (CLDP) student elaborates:

The group forums helped to build relationships and begin to consider each other’s roles ... This gave rise to learning from one another and gaining important information from one another thus furthering our own intervention process.
The weekly forums highlight the powerful conversational nature of interdisciplinarity, and the benefit gained through students from different branches of knowledge talking to one another (Davis 2007), and building closer relationships both within and beyond their practice learning site. One of the occupational therapy (CDP) students reflects:

We got to know each other and started relating to one another. As a result, we communicated on block, and also off block, via WhatsApp and email. We built trust, an amicable relationship and an efficient way of working together to achieve a goal. All this helped us feel a sense of purpose and a dedication to learn together.

The value of building relationships emerged as a key element of practice within and across each of the disciplines. Creating opportunities to engage with fellow students outside of their disciplines enabled new insights to emerge, and new practices to be conceptualised.

From the students’ written feedback, it emerged that one of the most effective strategies for interdisciplinary engagement, in addition to building relationships, was the development of joint project-specific collaboration. Echoing Cahill et al. (2013), this points to the importance of developing a project-based model of interprofessional engagement between students as a catalyst for strengthening working relationships. The after-school homework programme was mentioned repeatedly by students in their post-block feedback as an example of a joint project that enabled authentic interdisciplinary collaboration. Through this programme students from the different disciplines were required to collaboratively conceptualise, formulate and implement a community development initiative based on the needs of the school. This involved learning to engage with one another about the contributions of their individual professions, articulating joint expectations, negotiating boundaries and agreeing on the designation of roles and responsibilities. One of the occupational therapy (CDP) students reflects:

What worked best to build [collaborative] practice across disciplines were project-specific interdisciplinary meetings where the project would be discussed, roles would be assigned and necessary information was discussed and shared. For example, when we held meetings with the [speech- and language therapists] before doing sessions with the mentors. Arranging regular meetings with one another and formulating the expectations we had of one another in the smaller group was very important. There was a time where we had to resolve tension in the group and we agreed that, in order to learn, we had to be open and honest with one another. This meant that we had to share and offer constructive criticism when necessary in order to improve our working relationship.
This sentiment is echoed by one of the occupational therapy CLDP students:

Having projects that demanded multiple perspectives and areas of expertise created the need for cross-disciplinary action. This was strengthened by having a space to communicate and share, and also having the forum and Appreciative Inquiry sessions, which assisted in the building of relationships.

The development of interdisciplinary engagement between students was enabled by academic staff members reflecting on their own practice through the two action-reflection cycles. The importance of collaboration and interaction by academic staff across disciplines is underscored by Harris (2010). From the academics’ perspectives interdisciplinary collaboration requires an ongoing self-reflective approach that draws on, rather than blends the disciplinary knowledge of the individual professions (Bossio et al. 2014). Moving away from an assimilative approach, academics articulated the importance of students grasping their individual discipline-related theories within their particular practice-learning context, and being able to apply their theories to their specific practice. As the occupational therapy (CDP) clinical educator reflects:

I’m interested from the scholarship perspective in how the different knowledges from the professions are coming together … you don’t want it to be team building … It’s about how the students together think about what needs to happen in that session and craft a session with aims that are the same, but bring their professions specifically … and combine them.

Bossio et al. (2014) highlight the importance of mediating the complexity of interdisciplinary engagement, suggesting that interdisciplinarity is achieved ‘by building new understandings through collaborative dialogue that both validates and critiques self-reflective inquiry’ (Bossio et al. 2014: 204). Interdisciplinarity extends beyond the inclusion of different disciplinary voices, towards the active reframing and reconceptualising of new thinking – and new practice.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, navigating the university–school interface through interdisciplinary collaboration resulted initially in students experiencing uncertainty and ambivalence. However, as they learnt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and accommodate new ways of thinking about their professional practice, students started shifting towards new and ‘transformative’ learning (Eady et al. 2014). This involved learning about how each discipline understood its contributions to the context, and required extending disciplinary engagement beyond traditional practices towards community practice through collaboration and interdisciplinarity. One of the occupational therapy clinical educators sums this up by emphasising the importance of context:
Here’s a context that says we need to be responsive to some of those issues. And if we had to genuinely [respond] to what we seeing, we couldn’t practise traditional practice because the problems are systemic … They’re not quick fix things that you can say ‘okay, we’ll do this and we’ll do that and then we’ll all be okay’. So the community development approach makes sense in saying this is not going to have a quick fix but hopefully the outcomes will start to show … and the system will be better off.

In both occupational therapy (CDP and CLDP) as well as speech- and language therapy the evident shift in practice demonstrated a departure from the way that each discipline had traditionally viewed its practice in favour of a value-oriented, community development approach. Developing new ways of working required effort and investment from the academics especially in view of the different disciplines occupying different stages of community development engagement.

The data from both action-reflection cycles suggests that university–school partnerships offer a conducive space in which students and academic staff members can be encouraged to develop interdisciplinary practices in responding to the schools’ contextual needs. In professional learning situations we maintain that this is both beneficial and necessary in bringing coherence to the services offered within the particular context. Key to this discussion is the need to explore new ways to work as a collective across disciplines so as to generate new insights and introduce new forms of knowledge while preserving the individual contributions of each of the professions (Bossio et al. 2014).

Emerging from the study were two broad insights: the first related to the challenges of disrupting traditional biomedical practice – as reflected in the shift from clinical practice to community development practice, especially for those students who were new to this approach. The second related to the shifts students made towards constituting new as yet untested practices. Both insights highlight the need for students and academic staff to actively pursue conceptual and practical ways to work together and for this to be coordinated in consultation with key role players at the school.

Through exploring an interdisciplinary approach to service learning, in conjunction with collaboration with the school, insight is gained into ways in which current practices in the health sciences disciplines can be disrupted, and alternative approaches can be conceptualised in order that students undertaking their professional learning can more effectively support the school in responding to its needs. Although the three disciplines involved in the study were at different stages in their orientation towards community development, the study represents a significantly promising endeavour by occupational therapy CDP and CLDP in collaboration with speech- and language therapy to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to service learning. This approach values the contributions of each discipline, and foregrounds the context in which the service learning takes place.
Disrupting traditional site-based practice, and conceptualising new practices in service learning provides ways to enhance student learning and to strengthen the contributions students make to the community site in which they are placed. The study suggests that, through interdisciplinary engagement facilitated by the SII, university students and academics were able to re-orientate their thinking and doing – from traditional conventional practice towards collaborative community development practice – thus offering a new way of thinking about the contribution of health professionals in schools.

References


