

## **‘Educating Social Work Students against the Grain’: Tutors accepting that facilitating learning means we need to adapt our preferred teaching styles.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws on a case example of working with a student within the workplace whose personal characteristics and learning style conflicted with my own preferred style of delivery, and indeed challenged my own professional persona. Concepts of power and emotional intelligence are explored, and the need to work in partnership to create a ‘safe place’ for learning and assessment in an educational context. The willingness to change teaching style and adapt contributed to my own professional development as a facilitator of learning, and enhanced the learning experience for the student.

### **Introduction**

This paper will explore the need to move beyond any usual default teaching style, with particular reference to educating student social workers in the workplace. Education in this context is known as practice learning or practice teaching, but in essence, both refer to the learning that takes place in the work-based element of social work training. A re-occurring theme throughout this paper will be the impact of emotions on the practice educator role. Ferguson (2011:203) highlights the significance of emotions in the social work field of child protection, and encourages the open discussion of ‘atmospheres in which the work is being done and what is reverberating in the body, mind and intuition of the worker’. Howe (2008 cited in Ingram, 2013:5), concurs with these thoughts in describing the day of the social worker as being ‘suffused with emotional content’. Moreover, Knott and Scragg (2010) and Maidment and Crisp (2011) comment how emotions form part of our decision-making processes and therein reveal our values. Beckett and Maynard (2013)

comment that feelings experienced in social work practice may prevent us from carrying out our professional responsibilities. These thoughts have mirrored personal reflections on my own current practice educating experience, where the need to be conscious of the role of feelings on the student/practice educator relationship and the assessment of learning have been paramount. Williams and Rutter (2010) lend support to this reflection, and comment on the need to understand the complex nature of this relationship and the learning context. Cartney (2000) further comments that adult learning theories in themselves do not completely address the complexities that relate to power and the impact of emotions in the student/teacher relationship.

This paper will therefore draw on a case example of working with a student within the workplace whose personal characteristics and learning style conflicted with my own preferred style of delivery, and indeed challenged my own professional persona. It will explore concepts of power and identifies the need to work in partnership to create a ‘safe place’ for learning and assessment in an educational context. Drawing on the use of Driscoll’s (2007) reflective model, it will demonstrate how the willingness to change our teaching style and adapt can indeed contribute to our own professional development as facilitators of learning, and enhance the learning experience for students.

In order to protect confidentiality in the following case study, the student will be referred to as Toni. The case example refers to work undertaken during a 70 days’ work placement in a drug and alcohol setting. My role, as on off-site practice educator, was to assess Toni as having passed or failed key professional capability requirements set by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the professional regulator for social work, and the Professional Capability Framework (PCF)

(BASW 2012). We were therefore required to meet twice weekly for formal supervision, in addition to assessed observations of practice and appraisal of completed work. Toni was a confident, knowledgeable student who during an introductory meeting described herself as an 'activist learner and perfectionist' in need of developing skills of critical reflection and analysis in the practice context. After the meeting, I reflected on feeling threatened by the student, in particular with respect to the demands on me to reach a perfectionist standard. Moreover, Toni's activist learning preference conflicted with my preferred reflective style of teaching. Maidment and Crisp (2011) highlight the importance of unpicking our emotional responses as a way of understanding others. Indeed, without an awareness of this, Trevithick (2005) concludes that untutored emotions will affect judgement, reasoning, and our ability to change situations. I was aware that my planning for the next 70 days, a tight time-scale in terms of the assessment process, was not conducive to this student's learning and development, even though it had worked well with previous students. Supervision sessions needed to be active as well as reflective. Munro (2011), in reviewing child protection practices in England and Wales, highlights the importance of self-awareness, including the unpicking of our emotional responses as a way of understanding others and our responses. Ruch et al. (2010) refer to the concept of self as the combination of our emotions, values, beliefs and experiences that contribute to who we are as individuals. This concept of self is dynamic, and Ruch et al. (2010) explore further that what we decide to draw upon as we engage with others is affected by particular contexts. In my work with Toni, I had to be mindful of the power differential within our relationship; one of my roles being a gatekeeper for the profession and therefore being in a position to ultimately pass or fail the student's practice. My self-reflection following the initial meeting uncovered my own practice experiences of resisting pressures 'to do', rather than 'reflect and do', and I was therefore uncomfortable with the student's emphasis on completing tasks. We therefore needed to discuss this openly as a contemporary practice dilemma. Ignoring the threatening feelings at such an early stage would indeed

have been detrimental to the learning process of the student, and our working relationship. Helpfully, Beckett and Horner (2006) tell us that positive change comes about through relationships, valuing the uniqueness of the individual. Therefore, my approach was to focus on this aspect.

## Relationships

Lefevre (2005), Rolfe et al. (2011), and Trevithick (2005) accept that the success of any supervisory activity is dependent on the quality and effectiveness of the relationship between the parties involved. Lefevre (2005) eloquently outlines the core conditions for learning, including a supportive environment, and an open and transparent relationship that allows for mistakes. Moreover, Grant and Kinman (2011) stress the importance of both parties being active participants in the supervisory relationship. This mirrors the principles of democratic education, which begins with the premise that everyone is unique, so each of us learns in a different way. Tisdell (1995 cited in Williams and Rutter, 2010:43), introduces a range of factors that a learning environment should offer to promote inclusivity. In addition to the recognition of individual differences of people and their previous experiences (BASW 2012), Tisdell (1995) includes the need to acknowledge the power disparity between teacher and learner. Barnes et al. (2015) emphasise that the interdependence in social worker/service user relationships in social work practice, where both parties feel able to bring their own experiences and contexts to the working relationship, builds the foundation for a trusting and dynamic relationship. Such a relationship needs the foundation of trust, and indeed may require a degree of emotional exposure to truly understand the feelings of each other.

Consequently, the next session centred on an acknowledgement of our differing learning styles, alongside a sharing of how we had both felt after our initial meetings. Student feedback disclosed her need to be active during supervision sessions, so we agreed that I would set tasks for her to work through, both in and between supervision sessions. In this way, we were able to discuss future plans for teaching, acknowledging the

power dynamic between us, and agreeing to openly review the progress made, in particular if supervision was not meeting Toni's needs. This involved negotiating a continued focus on developing skills of critical reflection, as this was an identified learning need for the student. Having acknowledged our differing learning styles, I shared a plan for supervision with the student before the next session took place. This gave Toni the opportunity to contribute to the planning aspect of our supervision and subsequent assessment throughout their placement.

My focus was to deliver teaching that inspired and developed skills of critical reflection, in an activist style. The planning of the teaching was informed by adult learning theory; in particular, 'need to know motivation', the 'need to be self-directing' and 'learner empowerment' (cited in Maclean 2013:53). We also agreed for our first session to be observed by an independent practice mentor. This mentor provided feedback to Toni and I as part of the assessment of our desired partnership working. The mentor also assessed my practice against national practice educator standards (PEP's) (BASW (2013), which enabled me to achieve the qualification to assess students in their final 100 days placement. Moreover, it provided an objective reflection on the teaching session and an additional forum where the student could raise concerns throughout the 70 days. In total, the mentor observed us together three times. This acknowledged the power dynamics of the assessor/student relationship and consequently enhanced the participation and engagement of the student. Lefevre (2005) suggests that such partnership working can encourage the student to engage in scrutinising their skills in a way that feels safe. Moreover, Knott and Scragg (2013) would assert that to develop skills of critical reflection, such conditions are necessary. As mentioned, a key learning need identified by the student was the development of skills of critical reflection. Therefore, the initial base for my teaching founded on introducing differing models of reflection, which focussed on live practice issues that Toni was facing. A particular example involved her being lied to by a young woman she was working with. Driscoll's

'What?' model (Driscoll 2007), suggested by Bassot (2016) was chosen as a useful starting model for early reflective work, in particular as the model is concise and complements an activist learning style. We discussed the impact of this experience (the 'what') and analysed the event from both a social worker and service user perspective (the 'so what'). We also reflected on how Toni would approach this person the next time they met (the 'now what'). This included role-playing some possible scenarios. Morrison (2009) asserts 'the key to learning and development lies in the ability to engage in, and make use of, the workers' experience.' Observation feedback from the mentor, on the use of this model, highlighted how it helped to demonstrate the purpose and value of reflection by skilfully placing the student's focus of learning into their area of strength, that being action and planning. For example, in Toni's case it allowed her to 'do something' with our reflective thoughts. This was aligned to supporting Toni to develop her professional capabilities, in this instance towards reflection rather than hyper activism, a key aspect within the Professional Capability Framework for social workers (BASW 2012). My focus centred on how these skills of critical reflection could ultimately transfer into her work, in particular when grappling with the uncertainties inherent in social work practice.

## Reflection

Knott and Scragg (2013) and Williams and Rutter (2013) discuss that it is through the process of reflection that our learning as professionals develops. However, critical reflection presented as a process allows for awareness of new insights on our practice, rather than perceived personal criticism. Williams and Rutter (2013) particularly highlight the importance of the supervisory relationship in ensuring this positive outcome, and the importance of supervision being a safe place. Holley and Steiner (2005) further advocate the need for a safe environment in order that social work students can freely express their ideas and feelings, particularly around challenging areas such as diversity, cultural competence, and oppression. As our supervision journey progressed, differing models of reflection brought to each session

formed the basis of our discussions. This was to increase Toni's knowledge of differing styles of reflective models and, more importantly, discover a model that was meaningful and relevant for her, both in ongoing training and in future practice. Latterly, the student was encouraged to bring her choice of reflective model to supervision, which allowed a shifting of power within our relationship, which became more student-led.

Working in partnership with Toni highlighted the importance of adapting to the learning style of the student, even if this felt uncomfortable, to ensure a fair assessment of the student. Whilst an easier option would have been to continue to teach in my default reflective learning style, there is no doubt that this would have proved unhelpful both in relation to our supervisory relationship and in relation to Toni's ability to learn and develop. My intention was to mirror the necessity of identifying and questioning our practice, in particular in relation to the power dynamics existent in our assessment based social work relationships. Maidment and Crisp (2011) advocate that by drawing on the concept of emotional intelligence, we are able to recognise how both positive and negative feelings can enhance the learning opportunities available within a supervisory relationship. By respecting the uniqueness of Toni, even if at first I viewed her personal qualities as challenging, has enabled my development as an educator and challenged some of my practices in a positive way. As a social worker, it is of paramount importance to adhere to the codes and conduct of the profession (HCPC 2016) and ethical practice (BASW 2012), which assert the need to treat individuals as unique and to practice non-judgementally. Toni's example has highlighted that there is a need for constant reflection on our practice that could otherwise become a 'default style of delivery'.

Reflecting on this case example, Williams and Rutters (2013) humble stance proved an important concept in this supervisory relationship. It was important to acknowledge that my default reflective teaching style was unhelpful for the student. This needed communicating in an open and honest way, which allowed us to develop much more of a partnership

approach to learning, where the existing power dynamics between teacher/assessor and student were openly discussed and minimised. Student feedback is always important, and Toni communicated to the independent mentor that the respect implied by the change in teaching style enabled her to develop her reflective practice skills, in particular due to the modelling of good practice that she observed. Webb and Carpenters' Systematic Review of Interventions (2012) identified that supervision is a major factor in social work staff retention. However, research also suggests that it has to be the right type of supervision. When discussing their practice, social workers should have the time, and a safe environment, to reflect and learn both from their own experiences and from wider research messages, without fear of judgement. This supervisory experience was one that contributed to the student's learning journey, and research by Gibson (2014) suggests would have aided the student's development of emotional resilience and social identity. Ingram (2013b) discusses the importance of emotions in forming good working relationships with service users. He highlights the role of emotional intelligence as a key skill in managing the complexities of social work practice. Social workers need to be aware of their own emotions; be able to understand and manage these within relationships; be motivated to understand the emotions of others; and to be able to communicate these emotions within working relationships (Ingram 2013b). Moreover, Munro (2011) recognises emotional intelligence as the foundation for relationship-based practice. Relationships may be good or bad but, in relation to social work practice, they exist and are formed for a particular purpose; namely the service user (and in this example the student) achieving positive change (Ingram 2015). This is not without its challenges! However, it also means educators of students need to be mindful of their own professional socialisation of the student, as suggested by Bogo and Wayne (2013). In my "human interchange" (Bogo and Wayne 2013:3) with students there is a need to ensure teaching is founded upon and mirrors sound professional values and standards.

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted two important themes. Firstly, the need for 'professional humility'

(Williams and Rutter 2013:13) where we are open to the ideas and attentive to the voices of those with whom we work, in this example student social workers. Secondly, the need for practice educators to be aware of the impact of emotions on practice learning, which can 'avoid defensive, routinised and ritualistic responses' (Davys and Beddoe, 2009:920). These are concepts I hope to embed in my future practice and a consideration for other practice educators engaged in the assessment of students.

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## Biography

**Kay Wall** is currently a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Worcester. She has worked in Youth Work Services including young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties in residential care. Her work as a Probation Officer was at a time when probation services in England and Wales were **provided** by qualified social workers. Consequently, her predominant passion is working with, and for, adults and children who have offended, in particular giving them a voice. Her part-time work enables her to continue working alongside young people attending the Youth Offending Service, as well as supervising students in the workplace as a practice educator.