



Reflective Practice in Social Work

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Reflective Practice in Social Work

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Chapter 8

Reflective practice on placement

Terry Scragg

A C H I E V I N G A S O C I A L W O R K D E G R E E

This chapter will help you to develop the following capabilities from the Professional Capabilities Framework:

- **Knowledge** – Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory.
- **Critical reflection and analysis** – Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making.

It will also introduce you to the following standards as set out in the 2008 social work subject benchmark statements:

- 5.8 Skills in personal and professional development
- 6.2 Reflection on performance

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the use of reflective practice while you are on placement as part of your social work degree programme. Discussion of the origins of reflective practice, its evolution and relevance to social work are discussed in other chapters in this book. This chapter describes a range of practical activities that can increase your engagement with reflective practice, which will enhance your learning during your placement.

As your course progresses your knowledge and understanding of the use of reflective practice will increase and you should become more confident in recognising how you can apply the skills of reflection to different practice situations. When you begin your first placement you may find that your reflection is mainly at a descriptive level, but as you advance through your placements you are increasingly able to use reflection to analyse your practice, culminating in your final placement where you are able to reflect in a critical or transformational way. Once you are qualified as a social worker you will find reflective practice continues to play an important part in your continuing professional development, and you will be assessed in practice to gain a post-qualifying award and as part of the assessed and supported year in employment

(ASYE) (www.skillsforcare.org.uk) and the employer's standards for social workers (www.local.gov.uk/workforce). The opportunity to develop your skills in reflection while a student on placement can help you to value the importance of this activity throughout your professional career (Roulston et al., 2014).

Although this chapter is primarily concerned with the student's understanding and development of reflective practice, it should also be of interest to practice educators. The practice educator's focus on supporting the student to develop their skills in reflection is mirrored in their own need to *reflect on their own practice, monitoring and analysing the outcomes of their reflection so that new learning can be identified and shared with the student and others* (Ixer, 2003).

Reflection within the placement setting

Throughout your placements you will use a variety of approaches to develop your reflective practice. The important element in the process is that it takes place within a relationship where your practice educator can facilitate your learning through regularly reviewing your work with service users, challenging you to describe your practice, giving you feedback, and identifying your future learning needs. The main context for this to happen is the supervision session where you meet with your practice educator. To create the right conditions for reflection your practice educator needs to be familiar with your practice, understand the main social work theories relevant to your particular agency setting, and the processes involved in reflective practice. For supervision to be effective it relies critically on the quality of the relationship between practice educator and student, and is undertaken on a regular basis where there is sufficient time in an appropriate setting and in conditions of privacy and without interruptions. The practice educator also needs to be able to ask the right questions that will help you analyse your practice in a way that leads to greater insight and understanding of your actions, and those of others. You should not expect your practice educator to have all the answers to practice issues, but rather to be able to facilitate an increased awareness of the range and possible approaches that you can test out in the future.

ACTIVITY 8.1

What is your experience of supervision?

- *Do you feel supported and is there mutual respect between you and your practice educator?*
- *Are you happy with the frequency of supervision sessions?*
- *Are you happy with the way the sessions are organised?*
- *Are you able to contribute to the agenda?*
- *Are you making a substantial contribution or always leaving it to your practice educator to take the initiative?*
- *Do you receive a copy of the supervision record following each session?*
- *Are there changes that would make the sessions more effective for you?*

Comment

Your response to these questions will indicate whether you are satisfied with the supervision arrangements, and that you feel confident that supervision takes place within a supportive and trusting relationship, where your practice educator offers non-judgemental feedback on your practice and that you feel 'safe' to disclose your anxieties or concerns about practice situations within supervision (Ixer, 2003). Where you have concerns you should discuss these with your practice educator and work together to identify how the supervision arrangement can be changed to meet your needs, and also ensure that they meet the requirements placed on the practice educator as part of their contractual agreement with the university.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

A study by Roulston et al. (2014) found that students valued supervision in a safe and supportive environment where they had a positive working relationship with their practice educator that was conducive to learning. Approachable and supportive practice educators, who also demonstrated their experience and commitment to the role, were valued by students and were influential in helping the student to develop professionally. Students also valued constructive feedback on their practice dilemmas, discussion of their feelings and values, with time to reflect on their practice. The findings of this research suggest that the quality of the supervisory relationship is a key influence on the student's learning and level of satisfaction with the placement.

Being prepared for supervision

You can increase the potential for satisfactory supervision sessions if you ensure that you are prepared in advance.

- Make notes before the session of any issues or activities that you have been involved in since the last session (in addition to your reflective journal extracts) that you want to discuss. Share this with your practice educator prior to the session, so they are prepared to discuss the issues you want to raise. You could email it along with any journal extracts you are providing for your practice educator.
- Ask your practice educator to support you in dealing with difficult situations through the use of rehearsals or role play so that you are more confident when you experience the real situation.
- Supervision is a two-way process of interaction. Make an active contribution and demonstrate your commitment to developing your practice.
- Make your own supervision notes so that you have a personal record of the discussion, decisions taken and any actions suggested by your practice educator.

How reflective practice can help you during your placement

Your practice educator should ensure that there is clarity about the purpose of reflection and that it is an activity concerned with professional learning and development, that personal issues are addressed only in so far as they affect your professional practice, and that you are comfortable discussing your performance (Fook and Askeland, 2007) within carefully established boundaries (Hunt, 2001). The establishment of ground rules and boundaries early in the placement is essential, as is a supervision agreement that outlines the practicalities that can form the basis for clear expectations on your part and those of your practice educator (Maclean and Lloyd, 2008).

An important prerequisite for your understanding and confidence in the use of reflective practice is that at an early stage both you and your practice educator explore what each of you identifies as the main elements of reflective practice and how and when it is used during the placement, recognising that it is one element among a range of potential learning opportunities. It is likely that during the first placement your understanding of reflective practice may still be developing, and therefore it is important to avoid the risk that you could be placed at a disadvantage because your level of understanding does not accord with that held by your practice educator (who in turn may have limited understanding). Clarity between you both on the purpose and forms of reflective practice can help avoid the potentially discriminatory element in the assessment of your practice, which could further increase the imbalance in power between you and your practice educator (Ixer, 1999).

ACTIVITY 8.2

Both you and your practice educator should do the following.

- *Describe what you understand by the term 'reflective practice'.*
- *Compare your definitions.*
- *Agree a common understanding of reflective practice.*
- *Agree how and when you will make use of reflective practice.*

Comment

The purpose of this activity is to ensure that there is a broad understanding of what the term reflective practice means to you and your practice educator. This can help avoid some of the risks identified by Ixer (1999) and, if applied without prior exploration and agreement between the two parties, potentially place the student at a disadvantage and undermine their self-development.

Developing your reflective journal

Reflection can take a number of forms, with the most common approach being the journal (sometimes described as a diary or log), which you complete regularly throughout your placement, and selective entries are used as the basis for discussion with your practice educator. Describing your reactions to practice experiences is helpful in enabling you to clarify your thoughts and emotions, externalise your ideas and help you work out future strategies. If you use it to describe particular experiences that are significant to you, for example a critical incident or completing a process recording of an interview with a service user, it can also help you to measure your progress over the duration of a placement (Cottrell, 2003). It then has the potential to be a useful reminder of how your understanding of practice situations can change over time.

There is no right or wrong way to write up a reflective journal. Your approach will be one that is right for you, but it is helpful to go beyond pure description and incorporate your reactions, thoughts and feelings, and what you have learned and what you hoped to achieve (Parker, 2004). The following general guidelines will enable you to capture the essential elements of particular experiences and help in getting you started.

- Set aside some time each week for writing up your journal, but remember that it is advisable to write down particular experiences while they are still fresh in your memory. The longer you leave recording your thoughts after an experience the harder it becomes to recall exactly what happened and how you felt about it.
- Write your journal entries in the first person (I felt ... , I thought ...).
- Give yourself sufficient time to mull over your thoughts and ideas.
- Don't worry about style or presentation, as this is your personal journal.
- Describe what happened, but also ask yourself critical questions about the how, why, and what of a situation.
- What does your account tell you about your thoughts and feelings about the experience you have described?

CASE STUDY

Jack is in his first placement and has been asked by his practice educator to use an early supervision session to discuss how he can use his experiences to develop his understanding of reflective practice. Prior to this session they had compared their understanding of reflection and its application to practice. The practice educator, Sarah, suggests that he starts a reflective journal where each week he records his thoughts about events in the placement, particularly focusing on critical incidents or other occurrences that have been problematic or challenging and have significance for him, in a narrative form. She suggests that he records his reactions without attempting to overly edit his responses. The very act of writing his diary enables Jack to transform his thoughts into a narrative process

that he can then use in supervision sessions. Sarah asks him to email his diary entry to her prior to their fortnightly supervision sessions, ensuring that no service user, carer or professional can be identified in his journal entries. Sarah reads Jack's journal entry before they meet and identifies questions that she wants to raise with him.

When they meet, Sarah invites Jack to select events from his journal and she uses the sessions to explore what the events meant for Jack in terms of his thoughts and feelings and what he has learned from the process. What she is doing is asking Jack to 'reflect on his reflections' in order that he develops greater insight into his own practice. As Jack is new to using reflection, his narrative is largely descriptive. Sarah understands his stage of development and progressively encourages Jack to take an increasingly analytical approach in his reflection, focusing on critical incidents, particularly those where he felt uncomfortable or where things didn't go as he had hoped. In this way he is encouraged to develop the skills that lead him to increasingly identify better understanding of his thoughts and feelings and the way this helps him to make connections with his personal assumptions about his practice. Sarah uses Schön's (1983) stages of reflection to provide a structure for the discussion. Through this process she challenges Jack to reflect on his experiences and helps him to appreciate the intuitive, emotional and analytic dimensions of social work practice (Munro, 2011).

Asking reflective questions

As you become more familiar with writing up entries in your reflective journal you could introduce the following set of questions as a starting point when you are thinking back over a practice experience that you will subsequently discuss with your practice educator.

- What was the event?
- Was it planned or unplanned?
- What exactly did I do (describe it precisely)?
- Why did I choose that particular approach?
- What social work theories seemed to be relevant to the situation?
- Did I work in an anti-oppressive way?
- How successful was I?
- Could I have dealt with the situation better?
- How could I do things differently next time?
- Has the reflection of my practice changed the way I intend to do things in the future?

Although we all at times reflect to some degree and draw conclusions from our experiences, here we are using the structure of a questioning process that can be applied

routinely as part of your reflection of your practice, whether you record an experience in your journal or not. It can become part of an ongoing structured dialogue with your practice educator that goes beyond random reflections and is part of a process that helps you build knowledge and understanding about practice. Reflecting on an experience in this structured way is about learning from the process with the aim of gaining insights that help you influence your future practice.

ACTIVITY 8.3

In order to develop your skill in writing reflectively, think back to a situation that challenged you in some way and feel free to write spontaneously whatever thoughts and feelings come into your head when you think about the situation. Through this process you are giving yourself permission to engage with your emotions and not censor your thoughts and feelings as you become aware of them when you recall an experience.

Comment

Freeing up your writing in this way can enable you to be honest about your practice, something you might not want to do when you discuss a situation with your practice educator, for fear of being judged not sufficiently 'professional'. If your relationship with your practice educator is founded on mutual respect and an openness between you then you should increasingly feel you can reveal more about your thoughts and feelings that can significantly increase your awareness of your values, attitudes and responses to practice situations. (See Chapter 2 for more ideas on developing reflective writing.)

Your reflective journal as evidence in assessment

To satisfactorily complete your placements you will need to submit a portfolio that demonstrates your achievements against the domains of the Professional Capabilities Framework. Entries in your reflective journal can provide valuable evidence of your progress throughout your placements and you should identify journal entries that demonstrate how your skills in reflecting on your practice have developed during the duration of the placement.

Different approaches to reflective practice

Although the reflective journal is described as an ideal tool to help you develop your reflective skills, other forms can include critical conversations with your practice educator, process recordings, and activities such as rehearsals and role play where you can test out different approaches to working with service users in a safe setting. You can also use the comments from your practice educator when they have observed

your practice, and participation in team or multi-disciplinary meetings, where you explore your understanding of organisational systems, processes and cultures and how these influence agency practices. Trying different approaches can help you learn what works best for you and in what types of situation (Quinn, 2000). Where there seems to be some agreement among researchers is that critical incidents increase the potential for effective reflective thinking (Griffin, 2003; Lam et al., 2007). These researchers suggest that practice situations that generate anxiety, or appear perplexing to a student, have greater value in terms of practice learning.

ACTIVITY 8.4

Discuss with your practice educator the different forms that reflection can take and identify jointly what would be most helpful for your development.

Comment

It is useful to avoid concentrating too narrowly on particular forms of reflection and consider the potential range of opportunities during your placement that could form the basis for reflection that would provide you with a richer and more fulfilling experience. The reflective journal is an excellent starting point as it offers you the potential to use narrative as a method to tell your story about your reaction to events, particularly the emotions and feelings experienced from contact with service users and others. Use the journal alongside other forms of reflection or as an adjunct to other approaches.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research by Wilson and Kelly (2010) explored the challenges and opportunities that students identified themselves when on placement. Although there was a high level of satisfaction by students of both their academic programme and practice learning opportunities, the research nevertheless highlighted some key areas for improving the student learning experience. The researchers found that many students reported a high level of stress during their practice placements, often related to unexpected learning challenges and demands by practice educators and tutors. Students were also concerned about dealing with conflict situations and challenging behaviour. Where practice educators supported students to develop their skills through role play and rehearsal this was strongly valued by students.

Ensure that reflection is challenging

Together with your practice educator you should avoid the trap of reflection becoming a mechanical routine and used unthinkingly with a checklist approach taken to each experience or event discussed. This can result in not engaging with either critical

thinking or the emotional impact of social work – creating the ‘risk of navel gazing’ – without the self-questioning, experiment and rehearsal for future action (Boud and Walker, 1998). It is also important to avoid reflective practice focusing exclusively on your individual practice and failing to consider the wider issues, including the practices, processes and routines that you observe in your placement agency. Finally, consider the wider social and economic policies that may play a contributory role in the problems experienced by service users and carers (Quinn, 2000).

Using an experiential learning approach

We have seen how the use of reflective questions can help you structure your thinking when you are writing up journal entries. To take things a stage further you can increase the effectiveness of reflection if you adopt ideas from experiential learning where you move beyond mere description of an experience and use the well-tested technique of the experiential learning cycle. There are a number of different models of experiential learning; all are essentially similar, asking you to describe an activity, evaluate and analyse your practice and identify possible future action. The best known are those of Kolb (1984) and Johns (2000). For the purposes of this chapter I have drawn on the Gibbs (1988) reflective cycle, which students find helpful in exploring their experiences. The value of using the experiential learning cycle is that it recognises that it is insufficient to have an experience and assume you will learn from it. Once you become familiar with using the learning cycle you can use it regularly to reflect on interventions, working through the cycle to help you identify if there is a particular stage(s) at which you experience problems.

Take as an example a first meeting with a service user where you have been asked by your practice educator to undertake an initial assessment prior to a further intervention. Use the stages in the learning cycle as you reflect back on that meeting.

- Stage 1: Description – What was the experience (what am I reflecting on)?
- Stage 2: Feelings – What were your personal thoughts and feelings during the experience?
- Stage 3: Evaluation – What went well and not so well about the experience? What made it difficult?
- Stage 4: Analysis – What sense did I make of the situation? What was really going on?
- Stage 5: Conclusion – What should or could I have done differently and what can I conclude about my way of working? Who or what might help?
- Stage 6: Action plan – What am I going to do differently in this type of situation next time? What steps do I need to take on the basis of what I have learnt? What support do I need to help me achieve change?

These questions can be built on with a greater depth of questioning as you become more skilled at reflecting on your practice and the work you undertake with service users becomes more complex and demanding. By adopting this approach your practice

educator is helping you to understand that there is considerable potential for personal development and improvement in practice in using a questioning approach as an example. By consciously adopting a critical approach using the learning cycle it takes you beyond pure description to actively engaging with each stage of the cycle.

CASE STUDY

You are a student in an adult services team working with older people in the community. A referral has been received regarding Mr Brown, stating that he is in his late 70s and has suffered a cerebral haemorrhage (stroke) and has been admitted to hospital. Following medical treatment and a period of rehabilitation, he is now considered ready for discharge. You are asked by your practice educator to visit Mr Brown and undertake a needs assessment and his readiness for discharge so that community support services can be planned.

You meet Mr Brown in the hospital ward and explain that you are a student social worker and that you have come to complete an assessment so that the service can assess his need for support following discharge. You find it difficult to communicate with him as the stroke has affected his speech and he becomes tearful at times during the interview. You learn that Mr Brown has some mobility problems due to his right side being affected by the stroke. As you struggle through the needs assessment form it is clear that Mr Brown's main concern is anxiety about how he will cope when he leaves hospital as he lives alone and has no family support. Although he wants to return to his own home he will clearly need support to help him with everyday domestic tasks.

You speak to the ward sister to try to obtain more information about Mr Brown's ability to manage on his own but feel that the ward sister is primarily concerned with a date when Mr Brown can be discharged as there are pressures on beds. You mention that Mr Brown wants to return home if he can be supported, although the ward sister suggests that Mr Brown would be better suited to a residential home. You state that you are not in a position to make any commitments about his discharge and wish to consult your supervisor. You return to the office to discuss Mr Brown with your practice educator.

Comment

This case study provides an opportunity to explore a range of themes, including the consequences of stroke for an older person, the impact of a stroke on speech and mobility, changes in emotions or depression that are often consequences of this condition, and anxiety about coping in the future. There is also your reaction to working with an older person, where you experience communication problems, and where there are pressures from health professionals related to resource issues between hospitals and community services. For example:

- What were your initial thoughts about being allocated the case?
- What information would have helped you prepare better for the interview?
- Did your thinking change as you gained more information?

- What were your thoughts and feelings as the interview progressed?
- What theories could offer ideas?
- Was there anything you would do differently if you were allocated a similar case in the future?
- What does this case tell you about the pressures different services experience when resources are limited and there is pressure on professionals to suggest solutions that are not necessarily in the best interests of service users?

By using this process you will be able to develop an understanding of the issues that you face when working with service users and from this experience increasingly construct a body of informal knowledge from your practice (Parker and Bradley, 2010). It is important that you make links between theory and practice following an intervention, and also regularly start to identify particular theoretical perspectives that can help you anticipate some factors that are likely to be present in a particular case.

The contribution of social work theories

It can sometimes be difficult to identify specific theories and practice models that neatly fit when engaged with service users. The immediacy of involvement in direct practice can mean that consideration of social work theories periodically takes a back seat. We have seen in the previous case study that to fully engage in a purposeful way with a situation it is important to be well briefed and confident that your knowledge and understanding, however incomplete, provide you with some indication of what you are likely to face when you meet a service user for the first time. When you are allocated a case, do you think about what theories might offer some pointers to how you approach the meeting with the service user? From what you know of the situation, what theories seem to offer some understanding of the service user's predicament, what they might be experiencing, and what practice methods could offer a way of working effectively in the situation?

ACTIVITY 8.5

To encourage you to think about how to apply theoretical perspectives to practice situations, Maclean and Harrison (2009, p23) offer some key statements that can help in this process.

- *What are the key aspects of the service user's identity?*
- *What are the key presenting issues?*
- *What are the key aspects of the agency context and practice?*
- *What are the key points of the work to be undertaken?*

Imagine that you are working with a young man with a learning disability who is moving from his parental home to live independently for the first time in supported accommodation. What theoretical perspectives and practice approaches does this case suggest that could offer a good understanding of the issues both he and his family face and how direct work with him could best meet his needs?

Comment

A number of areas suggest themselves in this activity. He is a male, has a learning disability and wants to be independent. His parents may be anxious about whether he will be able to manage independently and whether he has the skills and confidence to live independently. What support will he need to manage successfully? Practice issues would include a needs assessment, the consideration of risk factors, care planning, identifying support for independent living skills, and working with the housing provider. Personalisation would be the main practice focus in this situation, ensuring the service user is at the centre of the process (SCIE, 2010).

Some of the above areas suggest an interaction of theory and practice that can provide ideas about how you could approach a similar situation. Ideally you want to move to a position where you recognise how theory underpins practice and practice informs theory (Thompson and Thompson, 2008), rather than relying on theories to provide ready-made solutions. As you gain experience and explore more complex practice issues you should begin to recognise where theories can offer new insights or help you make sense of experiences that at first were puzzling. In the words of Howe (2009, p2), *if you can make sense of what is going on, then you are half way towards knowing what to do*, and applying social work theories can mean that your practice is sensitive, intelligent and organised.

Integrating theory and practice

In her review of child protection, Munro (2011) describes how social workers draw on both theory and practice experience in their work and together these enable them to make assumptions based on sound judgements that can help in decision-making. Skills developed through academic studies enable them to make sense of practice situations, whereas intuition derived from repeated practice experience can lead to beliefs or 'gut feelings' about situations that provide some security when operating in a world of uncertainty.

Similarly, as you gain more experience of working with service users you will come to recognise how emotions influence each encounter and what you are experiencing emotionally when you connect with the service user and their experience. Ruch (2002) suggests that there are a range of potential sources of information available to the social worker when responding to a new situation – theories, professional and personal experience, the experience of service users and knowledge passed on by colleagues – that can all help you enter a situation with some understanding of possible outcomes.

But these are only assumptions. Even if they have proved reliable in the past, they may not account for incidents in the service user's life that you have no control over, or personal issues in your own life that affect your interactions and responses to encounters with service users. Although each situation is unique, by building up practice experience (intuitive understanding) and analytic knowledge (application of theoretical models) and exploring through reflection you will develop knowledge and skills over the duration of your placements that will enable you to practise confidently at a professional level.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has introduced you to reflective learning in the context of your practice placement. It has identified the importance of supervision and your relationship with your practice educator and the value of working together to identify your understanding of reflective practice and how you can use this in your placements to support your learning. We have seen how you can use a range of practice opportunities to explore reflectively, and particularly the reflective journal. Case studies have provided examples of how you can develop skills in the use of a reflective journal and apply a structured approach to analyse your practice and learn from experiences and events during your placements. A case study of work with an older person provides an opportunity to explore challenging issues that offer ideas for future practice in different contexts. Finally the chapter reminds you of the importance of social work theories that should be an integral part of your practice. Combined with a growing understanding of different situations, this can enable you to develop both analytic and intuitive skills that can offer a degree of certainty when faced with future challenges. However, it is still important to appreciate that the uniqueness of each encounter suggests that a healthy scepticism is important in any practice situation.

FURTHER READING



Maclean, S and Harrison, R (2009) *Theory and practice: A straightforward guide for social work students*. Rugeley: Kirwin Maclean Associates.

A guide written by experienced practice educators that explains the major theories used in social work practice. Particularly helpful in relating theory to practice when on placement.

Howe, D (2009) *A brief introduction to social work theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

This excellent introductory text describes a range of social work theories, perspectives and approaches in an accessible way, providing a helpful overview of contemporary practice.

Parker, J (2004) *Effective practice learning in social work*. London: Sage.

This book provides a comprehensive exploration of the essential components of good practice learning, such as the integration of theory, reflection, assessment and the use of supervision.

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