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**The Social Care Work Portfolio: An Aid to Integrated Learning and Reflection in
Social Care Training**

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The Social Care Work Portfolio: An Aid to Integrated Learning and Reflection in Social Care Training

The focus of the paper is on the use of a specifically designed portfolio in social care training as an aid to both integrated learning and reflection. Integrated learning is achieved through the use of discrete sections in the portfolio which require students to discuss their practice placement agencies from perspectives that demonstrate their understanding of subjects such as theories and practices of social care, psychology, social policy, legal studies. Reflection, which is considered a core element of social care training, is examined as a learning tool. A model for the promotion of reflection is presented which utilises peer learning, purposeful use of narrative and focused analysis to help students gain new perspectives on their learning experiences. Criteria for the assessment of both integrated learning and use of reflection are presented. Some comments of students recorded during the evaluation process are presented as evidence of their learning through the use of the portfolio model

The Social Care Work Portfolio: An Aid to Integrated Learning and Reflection in Social Care Training

Introduction:

Research shows that social care work is frequently challenging and complex. (Graham 1994). It requires the practitioner to be able to reflect on and think critically about issues that arise in the workplace and to use developed skills as a means of their resolution. Professional expert knowledge, discretion, and judgement rest at the interface between theoretical knowledge, work, and the skill achieved through on the job training and practice.(Watson, Burrows, Player, 2002:9)

In order to prepare students for practice in this complex area, training must aim to develop students' ability to both integrate academic learning with experiential learning from the workplace and to use reflection. Brookfield (1987) suggests that being able to critically scrutinise their own performance in the workplace and learn from it contributes to students being actively engaged with the learning process. This use of reflection develops practitioners who can cope with change and respond professionally to unpredictable events that present in the workplace. (Schon,1983). Since unpredictability is a distinguishing characteristic of social care work (Graham 1994), it is suggested that reflection is a core element of social care training.

This paper discusses the use of a portfolio model in social care training. The model presents a means through which social care students are required to integrate academic and experiential learning. It also incorporates a framework for the teaching and facilitation of reflection. Integration of learning is developed through the use of discrete sections in the portfolio. Students are required to discuss their practice placements from perspectives that demonstrate an understanding of the core disciplines of their academic programme. These include the theories of social care, psychology, social policy and legal studies. Reflection is examined as an essential element in social care training. A model to guide and support the development of reflection is presented. This includes students working in peer partnerships within a specifically constructed classroom environment. Criteria for the assessment of both integrated learning and use of reflection are presented. Some comments of students recorded during the evaluation process are presented as evidence of their learning through the use of the portfolio model.

The portfolio model presented is currently in use as a framework for a European funded placement exchange programme for social care students from the Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland, Turku Polytechnic, Finland and Hogeschool Windesheim, Holland.

Purpose and Content of the Portfolio

The purpose of the social care portfolio is to provide students with a structure which enables them to:

- Authorise their own learning
- Document evidence of learning and development
- Foster on-going reflective learning
- Articulate their own care work philosophy
- Present work for assessment

Mattaini (1995) confirms that there are a variety of valid sources and types of knowledge that form the base of social work practice. These types of knowledge apply equally to social care work. They are:

- Practical wisdom derived from narrative experiences of the profession and professional colleagues
- Personal experiences of the practitioner
- Knowledge of the professional literature
- Knowledge of history and current events
- Research findings that inform practice
- Theoretical and conceptual analyses
- Information that is provided by cases themselves

The portfolio is used to aid students in their effort to synthesise knowledge from all of the above sources and to research how their placement agencies meet their stated aims. Students are required to critically analyse and comment on their findings. The structure of the portfolio is achieved by requiring the students to address four discrete sections in the portfolio. The sections, each of which relates to particular academic courses from the third year programme are:

Context in Society, Service Delivery, Client Case Study, and Reflective Account.

Context in Society: In this section students are required to locate their placement in its social context. This is likely to fall within the Health, Justice or Education sectors. Students are asked to discuss the legislation that regulates practice in their particular agencies, the social policies that guide practice, how the social policies are reflected in agency policy and how this in turn impacts on practice in the agency. Students draw on theory from social policy and legal studies for this section.

Service Delivery: In this section students are asked to discuss how their agency meets the needs of the clients within the service. They are expected to comment on the structure of their agency and how the structure facilitates the function of the agency. Illustrating their understanding of behaviour in organisations, students are asked to discuss the roles of the personnel in the agency and how these

facilitate the mission statement of the agency. For this part, students draw on their theory from organisational psychology.

Case Study: In this section students, under the guidance of their supervisors, are required to select a client to participate in a planned intervention. They are asked to discuss their assessment of this client and the goals that emerge from this assessment. Students are then required to draw up a plan of intervention aimed at meeting a selected goal. This intervention is carried out over five sessions and is evaluated for appropriateness and effectiveness.

For this section, students draw on theory from principles of professional practice and developmental psychology and demonstrate skills acquired in creative studies.

Reflective Accounts: For each of the three above sections students write a reflective account, which discusses what they learned about themselves as they undertook the work required for the section. The final section, section four, is an overall reflective account in which students discuss what they learned about themselves both during the purposefully designed classroom activities to develop reflection and their research for and writing up of the Portfolio.

The recommended word count for the Portfolio is 7000 words. This breaks into 1500 words for sections one to three and 500 words for the reflective accounts for each of these sections and 1000 words for the final overall reflective account.

Model for the teaching of reflection

Reflection as a learning tool is the central learning vehicle of the portfolio process. The content requirement of the portfolio demands that in addition to preparing three specific topics, students are required to submit four reflective accounts. In these, they are asked to narrate their professional growth and development in relation to their developing identities as social care workers.

Anecdotal evidence from teaching staff suggested that previous experiences of asking students to reflect had not always been successful. Students tended to compile descriptive rather than reflective accounts often with very little critical analysis of personal learning. This was not likely to facilitate the effective transfer of training to practice.

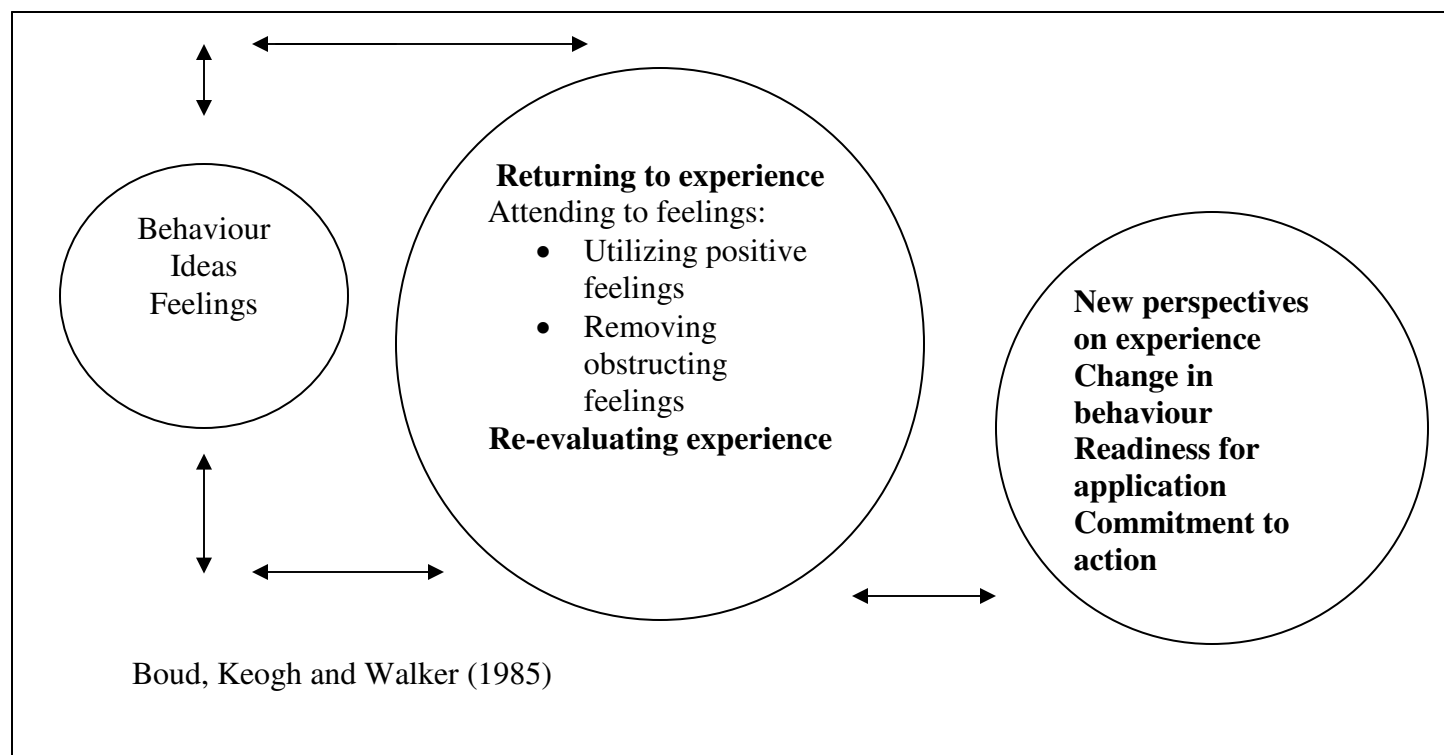
Shulman in a paper presented to the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, stated that a growing body of literature suggests that 'the business of going meta explicitly, consciously and directly may be the key to the elusive transfer of training that we've been wrestling with for over a century.' (Schulman 1996).

The concept of meta-cognition as an actual area of knowledge and as something that can be taught is advocated by (Bruner 1998).

This portfolio process was specifically designed to facilitate the inclusion of meta cognition. A module for the teaching of reflection forms part of the portfolio process. In this module tutors and students discuss their understanding and use of the reflection process by mutually constructing a definition of reflection to which they can refer. They also explore how reflection can be used as a tool to integrate and link learning within the domain of social care. Reflection in this context is seen as being a *'generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation'* (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985:33)..

The model designed by Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) to promote reflection in learning, is presented as a scaffold on which students structure their reflective accounts. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1



This model illustrates how, when learners consciously reflect, experiences act as a trigger for the reflection process, stimulating a totality of the processes in the learner which extend beyond the intellectual into behavioural and affective domains. The model points to the outcomes of reflection and suggests that these may be a '*personal synthesis, integration and appropriation of knowledge, the validation of personal knowledge, a new affective state, or the decision to engage in some further activity*' (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985:34). The model suggests a series of stages to the reflection process. Students are encouraged to follow these and to record their individual responses to each.

The classroom design as a 'safe space' in the teaching of reflection

The significance of creating 'safe' environments where peer-learning is facilitated and formalised within teaching and learning programmes is slowly gaining recognition in educational settings. However, as Boud suggests these practices are often introduced into existing courses in an *ad hoc* way, without considerations of their implications' (Boud 2001:3).

Providing a structure within which these interactions can occur can be a challenge for teachers and course designers. The need to facilitate the development of a classroom community where the emphasis is on students learning from each other, challenges the more traditional didactic approaches to teaching and teacher

roles. This is the focus of the formal classroom sessions for the teaching of reflection

The classroom design as a 'safe space' is central to the pedagogical framework of the portfolio process.

Within this 'safe space' students are encouraged to:

- Agree an understanding of the concept of reflection and its use in the learning process
- Use a given model to scaffold their reflective processes
- Examine the roles of the social care worker (Graham 1995).
- Acknowledge their own areas of strengths and weaknesses in relation to these roles
- Identify a peer with whom to establish a 'critical friend' relationship
- Re visit significant learning events from their work experience and discuss these with their 'critical friend.'
- Transcribe their spoken narratives into written reflective accounts in order to illustrate their own stories of learning and their developing social care work philosophies
- Attend a two-day de-briefing session at the end of the placement period and give a brief presentation on their work placement experience to the rest of the group.

The potential of groups to provide a safe space or 'cultural island' for their members has long been utilized in guidance and counselling practice. In these

contexts the group is valued, ‘ *not just for the possibilities of peer support that it provides but also for the opportunity to reclaim and reinterpret the lived experience of group members as they struggle to cope with new circumstances or explore new opportunities.* ’ (Brown, Crawford, Edwards *et al.* 2000:52).

Bruner’s preconditions for a setting where authentic and enduring learning can happen, (activity, reflection and collaboration) support the need for the creation of a classroom community where these can take place. (Bruner 1996).

Within the safe space of the classroom community time is provided for focused conversation to engage with and understand complex problems that often present on placement.(Daloz et al 1996). By recording significant learning events as journal jottings, these can then be revisited and reflected upon with a peer in the safe space of the classroom environment. Aspects of learning from the social care curriculum, which can be integrated and used to help resolve dilemmas and difficulties, are also discussed. Tutors facilitate this discussion. Two further elements form vital parts of this reflective process: critical friends and the use of narrative.

The ‘critical friend’ relationship in the development of reflection

The term ‘critical friend’ is one adopted by Hatton and Smith (1995) to describe the process of peer partnering where learning takes place from sharing reflections and working with each other. Hatton and Smith (1995) describe the process as a technique which creates an opportunity for giving voice to thinking while at the

same time being heard in a sympathetic, but constructively critical way. This process is used in the sessions on reflection. Students choose their critical friends in a specified way. To facilitate this, a role matrix of social care work is used (Graham 1995). The matrix lists nine distinct roles that social care workers must perform in order to undertake the complete care task. These roles form three discrete categories. Students are given the role matrix and asked to reflect on their competencies in each of the three categories of roles. They acknowledge their skills and recognise the areas of practice that are particularly challenging for them. The classroom is divided into three areas, each representing a role category from the matrix. Students are asked to go to the space representing their strengths. They discuss the reasons for their choice with their peers in the same category. They are then asked to select the category of roles that is most challenging for them and to select as a critical friend a peer from that group. These pairs then form a critical friend relationship and work together during the subsequent reflection sessions. These students discuss learning events and dilemmas from their work placements, using their journal jottings as prompts. The Boud, Keogh and Walker model (1985), acts as a framework to guide their reflective processes. Resolution and learning are constructed within the peer relationship as academic knowledge is fused with practice experience, developing awareness of professional growth and the students' own personal strengths and weaknesses. This process illustrates the importance of narrative in reflection.

The use of narrative in the development of reflection

Students are encouraged to consider narrative as significant to the process of reflection; as a mode of thought, a vehicle of meaning making and the means by which they tell their own individual stories of experience and learning (Bruner, 1996).

Students in the construction of their Portfolios use three different types of narrative. See Figure 2 below.

1. ‘Journal Jottings’: Students record selected learning events in brief written narrative to ‘look at’ experiences. The intention of this is to capture the experiences while they are still immediate in the students’ minds. These jottings are for students’ reference only and are not requested for assessment. Students are guided as to how they might record their journal jottings in a format that is accessible for them. Formats include: writing an unsent letter; a S.W.O.T. analysis where the experience is noted under the separate headings of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, finding a metaphor for the experience that can enable the subject matter to be explored in a new way. (Moon 1999)

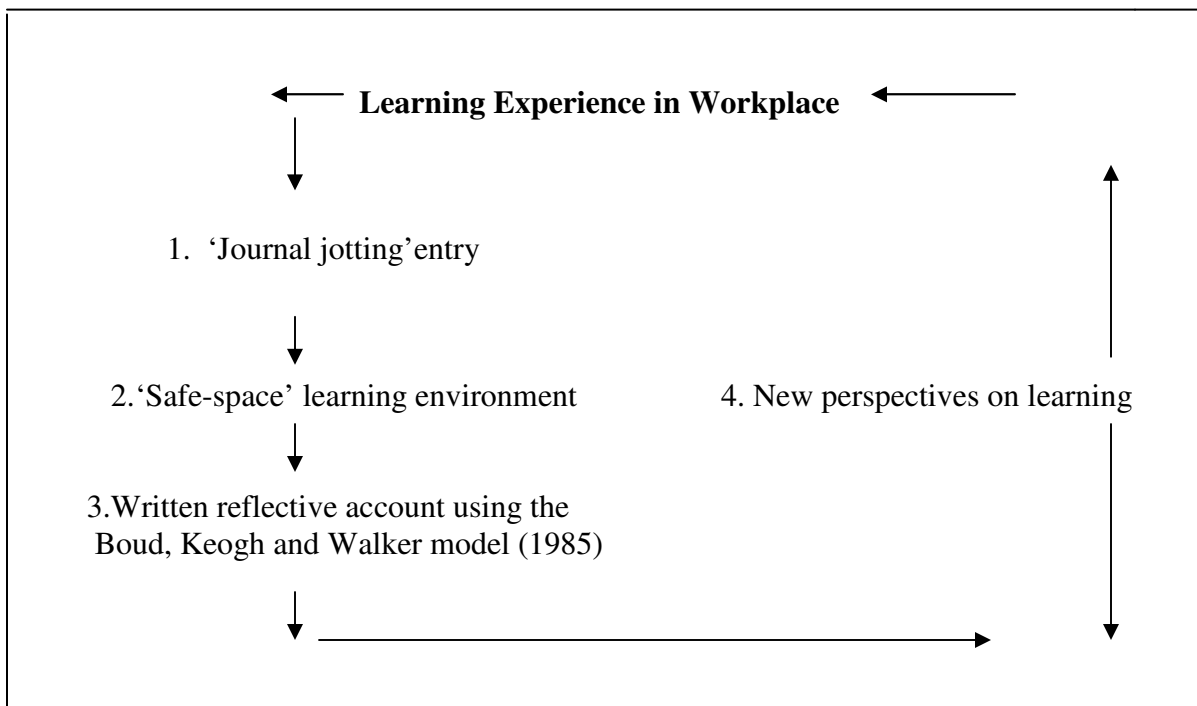
2. ‘Safe-space’ learning environment : Students work in

peer groups using spoken narrative. They also have opportunities to ‘look again’ at their learning experiences and to share these with a ‘critical friend.’ (Francis, Hatton and Smith 1995). Students use their journal jottings as prompts for these sessions.

3. Written Narrative Accounts

Using the Boud, Keogh, Walker model (1985), students analyse their learning events recording what they have learned through the analysis process and noting any new perspectives gained. They then reflect on how these can be applied to improve their professional practice.

Figure 2.



The combined actions of reflecting through both spoken and written narratives, result in new perspectives on learning experiences. Students are expected to record these new perspectives and to note the changes in behaviour and attitudes that result from them. These can then be applied in the workplace for improved professional practice. Students submit several written accounts of their sessions with their critical friends on which they receive detailed feedback from tutors on their use of the reflection model. These are not formally assessed but the feedback facilitates the students in the writing of their reflective accounts for the portfolio which are assessed.

Model for the assessment of reflection

For assessment purposes it was decided to assess the integration of theory and the development of reflection separately. The following criteria were selected for the assessment of the integration of learning:

- Understanding of concepts and practice related issues
- Integration of theory to practice
- Use of literature
- Critical analysis
- Cohesive flow of ideas expressed in written narrative format
- Correct referencing

60% of the overall Portfolio mark is awarded for integration of theory which is assessed across sections one, two and three.

Designing criteria for assessment of the reflective accounts proved more problematical. The difficulties in assessing reflective thinking processes are well documented. (Bruner 1996, and Broadfoot 1996).

The assessment criteria were based on the view of cognition in this context as being an emerging capacity, focusing on learning processes rather than learning products. Successful learning was therefore illustrated by:

- New perspectives on learning experiences and documented changes in behaviour
- Evidence of readiness to apply learning for improved professional practice
- Evidence of application of learning in the workplace
- Documentation of a developing awareness of the student's own capabilities and identity as a social care worker

The assessment criteria for the reflective accounts were as follows:

- Connotations of learning relating to own professional development
- Ability to tell own story of learning from the construction of the portfolio
- Use of the reflection model in order to clearly represent the various stages of learning throughout the reflection process
- Demonstration of critical analysis of own practice

40% of the overall portfolio mark is awarded for the reflective accounts which formed minor parts of sections one, two and three and all of section four.

Evaluation

The social care portfolio model was originally evaluated as a whole at the end of the pilot phase, with particular emphasis on the significance of the reflective element to the learning process. A questionnaire was used to collect the data. At the end of the second academic year, more focused research was planned to record the views of the student group as to the validity of the classroom sessions as communities for learning. It was hoped that the findings would corroborate with previous studies but also illuminate the significance of the 'safe space' environment from the discourse of users.

The use of a focus group was chosen as a qualitative methodology that would operate as a 'stand alone' means for this data collection.

The following comments reflect the views of a number of students:

We were more aware of the lecturer being part of the learning group when we were sitting in a circle

I think the idea of 'safe space' is a brilliant idea! It's just that we are so used to being told what to do, we weren't sure how to do it. Having it explained helped.

The critical friends idea should have been introduced long before placements began. I found the relationship really useful and could have done with the support during the first two weeks of my placement which I found really hard...

My critical friend pointed out to me things I wouldn't really see; different ways of going about things...

The whole process helps you to see the bigger picture. Without reflection, work as a social care worker is merely a series of events. With reflection, all these events can be turned into learning opportunities. These simple events can be turned into a series of interlocking clues to discover who you are as a social care worker.

Reflection helped me to join these together to form something of a learning curve for me.....

Overall I feel that the reflection process has helped me gain a greater self-knowledge and critical awareness of myself and of my practice, and I hope it has enabled me to become a more effective social care worker.

The social care portfolio has now been integrated into the third year of the BA in Social Care Degree Programme in the Dublin Institute of Technology.

During this, the third year of the use of portfolio, placement supervisors consistently reported incidents in which they recognised the process facilitating student learning during the placement period.

Specific areas of learning were noted. These included students' integration of learning, their use of reflection and their better understanding of the use and evaluation of specific interventions with selected clients.

Since placement supervisors are primarily concerned with the development of best professional practice, it is intended to use this target group to assess the use of the portfolio model as a means of enhancing students' professional practice.

This which will be the basis of a further paper.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the use of a portfolio with third year students of social care as a means of both integrating college learning and practice based learning and development of their reflective capacities. Integrated learning is achieved through the use of selected sections in the portfolio which require students to demonstrate integrated learning through discussing their placement agencies in their social context and describing how the organisational mode of these agencies facilitates service delivery. Students are also required, under supervision, to demonstrate their own professional practice with clients through the use and evaluation of planned interventions with selected clients.

Discussion of the social context requires students to demonstrate how their knowledge of social policy theory facilitates their understanding of the policies that guide practice in their placement agencies. They are also required to discuss the legislation that regulates practice in their agencies, drawing on their knowledge of legal studies. Section two requires students to apply their understanding of organisational psychology to discuss how their placement agencies are designed to meet the needs of clients within the service. In section three, students demonstrate how their understanding of social care theories facilitate their selection and use of selected interventions with particular clients. Reflection is emphasised throughout the portfolio process and is discussed as a core element of social care training. A model is presented for the teaching of reflection. This describes the use of the classroom as a safe space where students are expected to work with 'critical friends' and to use various types of narrative in a structured way to facilitate learning through reflection and the integration of new perspectives. Procedures for the assessment of both integrated learning and reflection are presented. An evaluation of how the use of the reflection model supported students' development of self knowledge and professional identity is captured in the students' statements which are included.

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