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**Practice Teaching and Learning in Social Care: Reflections on a Course
Development**

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Introduction

This chapter will discuss practice teaching and learning within the field of social care. The authors, the Social Care Education and Training Project team, aim to describe the process involved in the development of an accredited short course in practice teaching and learning. The course is intended to meet the needs of social care practitioners, working within a variety of social care settings, who agree to act as practice teachers to in-service students in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The context within which the course was developed is briefly outlined and the key principles and theoretical perspectives that influenced the course design are reviewed. The authors consider the learning that has occurred and go on to pinpoint some key strengths and areas for development based on reflection and evaluation. In conclusion, the authors argue for a more challenging, integrated and enhanced relationship between the student supervisor, student and tutor inherent within the concept of practice teaching and learning.

The issues highlighted are pertinent during a period when the Irish Association of Social Care Educators (IASCE) has set up a working group to examine supports for in-service students¹ aiming to identify minimum standards of support. This occurs within a climate where models of student supervisor training are being discussed (IASCE 2000; DIT 2004/05). It is hoped that this article will contribute to this timely debate.

Context of course development

In 2004, an innovative pilot project was initiated by the DIT in the B.A. (Ord.) Social Care Practice for students on the in-service degree programme. This pilot programme redesigned particular aspects of the B.A. (Ord.) course with a view to making it more relevant and

¹ The term *in-service student* refers to full time employees in social care agencies who are released to complete the BA (Ord.) in Social Care Practice or equivalent for one or two days each week for the course duration.

accessible for students and more manageable for employers in terms of releasing their staff. Key features of the revised course were a reduction in teaching hours, a corresponding increase in student self-directed hours and the allocation of credits for work-based-learning (WBL)². It was envisaged that teaching would be more intensive and supplemented by handouts, readings, seminars and tutorials (DIT 2004).

The need for a more structured approach to WBL

The increased importance attached to WBL in the revised course placed greater demands on students and their agency supervisors. Agencies were required to provide a variety of learning experiences, with an enhanced role for the practice teacher, in terms of student input, guidance, supervision and the organisation and facilitation of WBL. A more structured approach than that of the traditional student-supervisor relationship, which was felt insufficient to accommodate the changes to the in-service programme, was sought to support WBL. This involved the redefinition of the role of the supervisor to that of practice teacher, in recognition of their enhanced role, with very clear expectations of what was required.

Practice teachers were also expected to attend an accredited course in practice teaching and learning, although attendance was not obligatory. This course replaced a previous Supervisor's Course in the DIT School of Social Sciences. The fee for the new course was waived and also, in recognition of their contribution to the student's learning, an honorarium of €400 was offered at the end of the academic year to those practice teachers who attended the course and successfully completed the task. Guidelines were developed, emphasising a standard approach on a range of issues such as the identification of the learning needs of individual students and the prioritisation of designated bi-weekly supervision time. The roles and responsibilities of the student, practice teacher and tutor

² The term *work-based-learning* (WBL) is used to refer to in-service students' learning in their place of employment.

were clearly defined and a learning contract between student and practice teacher was developed. These requirements raised a number of issues including:

- the model of or approach to practice teaching;
- the structure of the practice teachers' course;
- the meeting of diverse learning needs within a variety of different settings;
- the development of a partnership approach with social care agencies.

This chapter will proceed to outline the key concepts in relation to this topic and then proceed to focus on practice teaching models and the structure of the course.

The concept of practice teaching and learning

The concept of practice teaching and learning in human services has its origins in professions such as social work, nursing and medical services, teaching, clinical psychology and therapies, which emphasise the importance of work-based and applied learning. A variety of titles often refer to the same role including work based assessor, practice assessor, practice educator, supervisor, practice tutor, on site supervisor and so forth (General Social Care Council 2002). Put simply, practice teaching refers to teaching students or trainee workers in an applied manner about practice within the agency.

Shardlow and Doel (1996: 4) define the practice teacher as "...the person in an agency who has responsibility for enabling the learning of a student". Similarly, they define practice learning as

...the learning that occurs whilst a student is on placement in a social work [care] agency. It should not be taken to imply that students do not learn about practice in class settings. It refers to the context of learning in the practice agency. (Shardlow and Doel 1996:5)

Practice teachers are not lecturers or tutors within the academy who teach about practice (Shardlow and Doel 1996). Yet, practice teaching is teaching because it aims to connect theory and practice by applying key knowledge within the specific context of the agency

and the client group. Practice teaching is about developing relevant practice skills and competences, applying them to the specific agency and client context and nurturing reflective professional abilities (Horwath and Morrison 1999).

Why the shift from supervisor to practice teacher?

The course design team argue for a conceptual change from student supervisor to practice teacher for two main reasons. Firstly, the crucial distinction is that practice teaching is grounded in the principles of teaching and learning (Shardlow and Doel 1996) and that the demands of WBL require this mindset. It is noteworthy here that social care practice in many mainland European countries, such as The Netherlands and Norway, utilises the language of teaching under the title of Social Care Pedagogy (Hallstedt and Hogstrom 2005).

Secondly, the new DIT in-service pilot programme demands a greater level of accountability from agencies regarding student WBL. A structured approach to practice teaching could help to nurture professionalism and professional identity, i.e. a professionalism that promotes learning, ethical practice, responsibility and autonomy and that would promote trust among the public and service users (Share and McElwee 2005). The conceptual change is also useful in the context of the varied quality of supervision in social care (Share and McElwee 2005; O'Neill 2000 and 2005; Morrison 2002) where some workers have experienced a climate of poor supervision.

Demands of the practice teacher role

The specific functions of the practice teacher include teaching, mentoring and supporting, guiding, reflecting, supervising, ensuring quality and accountability, organising/coordinating, evaluating and report writing. In addition, attention should be paid to the principles of anti-discrimination, respect and other core social care values. According

to Horwath and Morrison (1999:158) the practice teacher should focus on five aspects that will contribute to an effective learning environment, including being able to:

- Enable honest student reflection;
- Help with professional goal setting, including knowledge, values and skills development;
- Help students reflect on self and professional development including the impact of past experiences, learning styles and opportunities;
- Support student development; and
- Offer practical support that facilitates application of theory to practice.

Practice teachers are in a position to offer the learner a more applied learning experience, by assisting with the integration of theory to practice and also by encouraging reflective practice. The practice teacher helps the student to apply and integrate social care theories within the particular context of the client group and the agency (Crisp et al. 2004). Through the practice teacher's involvement, the agency has a greater role in the training of social care professionals and encouraging an increased level of engagement between the agency and the college.

Course design and development

A number of factors had to be taken into account when developing the practice teachers course. Firstly, the specific rationale for the introduction of the course, the particular context of the course changes within the DIT, the learning needs of social care students and the learning needs of potential practice teachers were carefully considered. Secondly, the course needed to be grounded within an appropriate theoretical framework and guided by good models of practice teaching (Toohey 1999).

Theories and models of practice teaching

According to Shardlow and Doel (1996) there is no comprehensive theory of practice teaching and learning. Multiple theories from a variety of disciplines including sociology, psychology, psychotherapy and education influence practice learning. These authors also note that practice teachers often construct an individual approach to practice teaching (Shardlow and Doel 1996). They identify several models of practice learning that have emerged since the 1970's, a model being loosely defined as "... one that offers suggestions about how to go about the various types of activities that are part of the student's learning on placement" (Shardlow and Doel 1996: 33). Doel (2000) highlights the positive move from apprenticeship models to more educational based models within UK social work in recent years, highlighting the importance of partnerships, innovation, creativity and professionalism. He goes on to note several important developments including the introduction of:

- explicit practice curricula;
- clear teaching and assessment methodology;
- service user involvement in student learning;
- a co-ordinated teaching approach to practice;
- common structures and language; and
- inter-professional training programmes

(Doel 2000:157-158)

Insights by Shardlow and Doel (1996) highlighted the need to develop a course based on the principles and methods of adult learning, the introduction of practice teachers to the concept of practice learning, the identification of core competences (supervision, reflection, and assessment skills amongst others), the provision of practical guidelines and the definition of roles and responsibilities. Some of the issues raised by these authors require a wider level of debate in the context of greater developments in social care education and training in Ireland.

Course philosophy

Course designers need to be reflective about their philosophy in relation to the teaching and learning on the course. An example of this is focusing on whether the course is student or lecturer focused. In recent years, the work of psychologists such as Bruner (1974) and Vygotsky (1997) has contributed to a more student-centred approach which highlights the role of the learner and the centrality of learning as a participatory and interactive process. In student-centred learning, it is considered essential that learners take responsibility, with support, for their own learning in that they must be able to identify what they need to know and what resources they require to achieve their learning successfully. This is considered particularly relevant to adult learners (Daines et al. 1998). This focus on the learner is consistent with the view presented by Rogers (1938: 18) when he states that “[t]he primary task of the teacher is to permit the student to learn, to feed his or her curiosity”. This involves empowering learners by providing a secure and safe environment and setting a context where learners can learn, question, discuss and challenge (Knowles 1970; Reece and Walker 2000).

Principles of adult learning

As the participants on this course were all adult learners, theories of adult learning have particular relevance to the course design. It is generally acknowledged that most adult students are highly motivated (Knowles 1983; Daines et al. 1998; Rogers 1989 and Reece and Walker 2000) although this must not be taken for granted. It must also be acknowledged that any group of learners will have their own individual needs and learning preferences. Knowles (1983) outlined six assumptions about adult learning:

- The need to know – adults need to understand the purpose of learning prior to starting;
- Readiness to learn – adults want to learn what they need to learn;
- Orientation to learning – adults are motivated to learn what is relevant to their own lives;
- Prior learning experiences to upon which to draw;
- Adults respond to external motivators (promotion) and internal motivators (increased self-esteem and job satisfaction); and

- Self-directed rather than teacher dependent learning.

Many of the course participants had been qualified social care practitioners and some had been supervising students for a number of years. In addition, it has long been recognised that creating a positive learning environment that is congenial, calm and relaxed is critical to learning as Daines highlights:

People learn best when they feel secure, their needs are being met, they know what they have to do, they are actively involved and engaged and know when they are achieving and see and experience that they are being treated as adults. (Daines et al. 1998:9)

This view is supported by Vlodoski (1985 cited in Reece & Walker 2000) who suggests that success, volition, value and enjoyment are the key factors in motivating adults to learn.

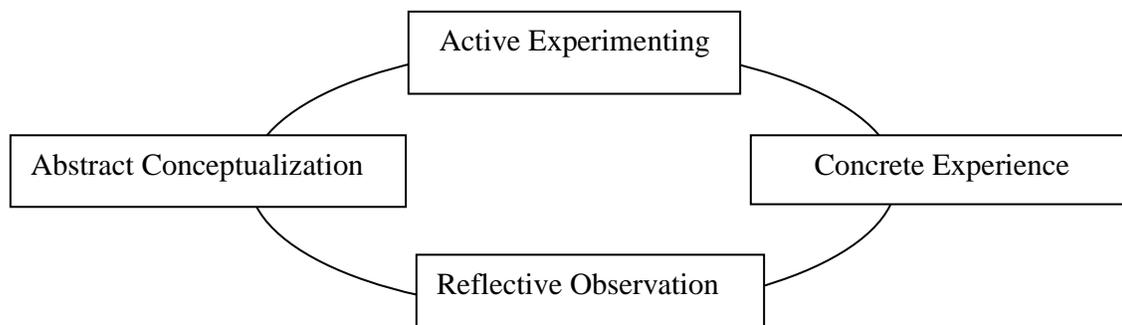
There has been criticism of some aspects of these theories due to the paucity of empirical evidence for the theories and models outlined (Tennant 1988; Curzon 1990; Edwards, Hanson and Raggatt 1996; Shardlow and Doel 1996). In addition, much of the existing empirical research has been criticised because it has focused too narrowly on white, middle class and well-educated participants, ignoring the diversity that exists among adult learners (Smith and Pourchot 1998; Shardlow and Doel 1996). Despite these criticisms, certain components of the theories and models outlined have proven useful in the design of this course. However, it is important to emphasise that each learner is an individual and will have their own unique learning style.

Other learning theories

Other learning theorists that proved useful in designing the course are Kolb (1984) and Biggs (2002). Kolb uses the learning cycle (shown below) to illustrate the various stages students go through during the learning experience. Kolb's learning cycle works as it encourages students to act on what they need to know, experiment and test what they have learned, reflect on testing and formulate new ideas and concepts and recommence the

learning cycle again. In summary, the student is constantly linking theory to practice. Critiquing Kolb's (1984) model, Tennant (1988:105) cautions against accepting the model entirely "...because it can lead to a number of misconceptions about learners". Jarvis (1987) describes it as being overly simplistic. He argued that learning does not always occur in such sequential stages and the model also excludes other possible learning styles such as memorization. Boud et al. (1985) also criticize Kolb's model as ignoring the affective domain and the effect of relationships on learning. It is now accepted that all experiences may not be transformed, conceptualised or analysed in the way Kolb suggested (Hull et al. 2005). Nonetheless, Kolb's model can be a useful tool.

Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle



Constructivism is concerned with what the learner does, e.g. how the learner constructs learning through activity. Alignment refers to what the teacher does in setting up a learning environment to achieve stated learning outcomes. Biggs (2002:1) suggests that the aim should be to drive students to solve real life problems and assess how well these problems are solved so that "[t]here is alignment all the way through from objectives through teaching method, to assessment: all involve students focusing on what they should be doing, solving professional problems" (Biggs 2003: 2). Informed by the above models and theories, the Project Team employed a variety of learning and teaching methods for example, role play, word storms, small group discussion and problem solving to maximise the educational opportunities for individual learners.

The process of learning from reflection is a skill that entails some engagement with past experiences and the feelings and thoughts that accompany those incidents. By reflecting in this way, it is hoped that new understandings will emerge that will impact on future practice. Moon (1999:23) suggests that reflection is ‘... a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcomes that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution’. It was Schon (1983) that first coined the phrase ‘reflective practitioner’ as a model of how professionals could find some resolution to difficult professional issues. In Brookfield’s (1983) *Self-Directed Learning and Critical Reflection Model* adults take charge of their own learning by deciding their own learning goals, finding appropriate resources, deciding on which learning methods to use, and evaluating their own learning process. He also observed that critical reflection of learning helps adults to learn more deeply. Brookfield (1995) argues that one can review a situation from different viewpoints including our own, those of our colleagues and the learners and from the theoretical literature. He refers to these as the four critical lenses and says critical reflection is fundamental to teaching.

The course participants brought with them a wealth of practice experience and many of them already had experience of supervising students or staff in the past providing a valuable resource to assist group learning. Group learning is considered to offer a valuable opportunity for enhancing learning. Very often in courses the key learning takes place during the group process but this can be lost if the focus is on the content and the end product. Race suggests that “[group] learning is about getting people to work well together, in carefully set-up learning environments” (Race 2001:140). He goes on to argue that group learning is one of the most natural situations for humans but it is important to realise that the roles played by others within the group can have a positive or negative effect on the learner. Some of the roles that may be undertaken by group members include listening, questioning, stimulating, encouraging, evaluating, harmonising and support, although some group members may show disruptive or negative behaviour. Learners were encouraged to share their knowledge and experiences with each other and many of the course participants

engaged at this level with little difficulty. This probably reflects their high level of experience and confidence in their practice.

Course outline

The course has been delivered three times, in December 2004, February 2005 and August 2005, over three full days with a maximum of twenty participants. Allowing that some agencies experienced difficulties releasing staff, two of the courses were delivered over three continuous days and one course was offered for one day per week over three weeks. The first and third courses were open to participants who were practice teachers for in-service students of the B.A. (Ord.) programme. The second course was also aimed at this group of practice teachers but in addition, was open to applicants who had students from the direct entry stream.

Applicants for the course were expected to have a professional qualification in social care or equivalent and to be responsible for a student on placement or in their workplace. Professionally qualified social care workers who were interested in taking a student in the following academic year could also apply. The course was designed to include inputs from course tutors and interactive activities for small and large groups.

The aim of the course was to introduce participants to practice teaching and learning in social care settings. In turn, it strove to facilitate and enhance WBL for either students in their student work placement or in-service students in their places of employment. On completion of the module the learners were expected to:

- Define, discuss and evaluate the role of the practice teacher in social care;
- Discuss and analyse how beliefs, values and attitudes impact on teaching and learning in the workplace;
- Demonstrate the ability to assist students to evaluate current theory and practice in the social care field and to integrate concepts across a variety of areas;

- Help students to take responsibility for the establishment of goals and the implementation and evaluation of care programmes; and
- Enable students to work in an ethical manner and as a reflective social care practitioner.

The course modules which deal with these various aspects are listed in figure 2.

Figure 2: Course Components

Course introduction and overview
Introduction to social care course syllabi
Roles of practice teacher, student and college tutors
Planning for work-based learning and student placements
How students learn
The role of supervision
Tripartite meetings
Assessment and report writing
Perspectives of students and practice teachers
Course review and evaluation

Assessment Process

The assessment process has been identified as a key determinant to a student's learning (Knight and Brown 1994). It is important that a range of assessment approaches are considered and the decision based on the most appropriate method to support learning given the diversity of the student population. Participants were assessed by means of a short multiple choice class test on the last day. The test was open in that it allowed participants to consult their own learning materials.

Course review and evaluation

Evaluation involves the use of “pertinent and incisive questions” (Cook 2004:1) and is valuable for two key reasons – it allows for assessment of the teacher’s performance and improvement of students’ learning experiences. Areas that can affect learning experiences include the learning environment, assessment methods, course subjects and design, resources and the incorporation of the course into a wider context of study (UTS 2004). Toohey (1999) argues that it is vital that a planned evaluation takes place in order to “provide evidence of the degree to which the programme meets its own goals and... to evaluate the programme from other perspectives” (Toohey 1999: 197).

Two separate evaluations were conducted. The first, an independent external evaluation (Thrive 2005) of the practice teachers course utilised student interviews, student questionnaires and focus groups as well as qualitative interviews with practice teachers. The second included completion of peer review and learner self-reports by course participants.

The overall findings from both evaluations were extremely positive. For example, the Thrive evaluation indicated that all practice teachers described it as ‘excellent’ (Thrive 2005:11). In addition, the Thrive evaluation stated that both students and practice teachers reported “greater role clarity” and the “positive impact of this component directly attributable to this training” (2005:11). The vast majority of the participants rated the relevance of the programme for practice teaching and learning and content of the syllabus as ‘excellent’, with the remaining participants rating them as ‘satisfactory’. In relation to the content and delivery of the course, the majority of participants stated the learning content and learning activities were ‘excellent’.

The course design team adopted various suggestions arising from the internal evaluation. The main findings of this evaluation were there was some repetition/overlap in course content. As a result, the course structure was reviewed and altered. In addition, two

sessions which, on reflection, were quite similar in content were amalgamated to further reduce any repetition. The participants also suggested that the course should be delivered at the beginning of the academic year. While we concurred with this comment, some agencies delayed identifying practice teachers, which was problematic in terms of course delivery. Also, there were differences of opinion in relation to the timing and structure of the course delivery. In response, the course delivery varied between three consecutive days and one day per week over a three week period.

Although not directly related to the design and delivery of the practice teaching and learning course, the external evaluation highlighted some interesting points in relation to the conceptual shift in the practice teaching role (Thrive 2005). One of the issues highlighted was that some practice teachers did not feel their agencies acknowledged sufficiently and supported the additional undertakings required to fulfil the role of practice teacher. The main suggestion of the practice teachers when asked what changes they would like to see in the operation of the practice teacher/student relationship was that the practice teacher/student meetings should take place outside of work hours to avoid work interruptions and allow more time for reflection.

This evaluation identified that the practice teachers who had not participated in the course “spoke less confidently about their role and what the student needed” (Thrive 2005: 39). This adds weight to the argument that the practice teachers course is valuable in terms of improving the quality of work based learning.

The report also found that a small number of students (16 per cent) were not satisfied with the quality of practice teaching they received (Thrive 2005). For example, the frequency of supervision meetings with some practice teachers did not meet the requirements of practice teacher responsibility, which suggests bi-weekly sessions. The Thrive report also cautioned of the danger that we are reliant on the professionalism of the practice teacher fulfilling the role adequately, stating the “possibility exists that students and individual practice teachers

could collude in covering up a lack of performance in this aspect of the course of which the college could be unaware” (Thrive 2005: 7).

Summary

The model outlined above has integrated particular theories of adult learning, teaching, assessment and evaluation as well as insights into good teaching practice. In addition, the course development team was guided by the value of reflective learning and the desire for professionalism in social care practice. Much of this has been done based on the practical usefulness of particular theories and on trial and error over the duration of course delivery.

The final product then is one that is informative and generic and suitable for new or untrained practice teachers. It allows for the development of different styles of practice teaching in social care depending on the particular agency requirements, student needs and indeed the client group. This was further strengthened by the variety of teaching and learning methods employed.

The course met the internal quality assurance requirements of DIT and was internally and externally evaluated. Social care students and existing practice teachers are involved in the teaching of the course, allowing for increased practical application and reflection. The course aims to develop a common language and approach to practice teaching and learning between the Department of Social Sciences in DIT and the relevant agencies, although this debate is still at its infancy. In addition, the course has streamlined structures for in-service students and their agencies in regard to practice teaching.

There are a number of areas that require further discussion and development. A three day course has significant limitations in what can be covered and choices must be carefully

made regarding content. This is consistent with Doel's (2000) observations about having an explicit curriculum and approach, e.g. whether a competency based approach is more desirable than a reflective approach. This discussion needs to begin in relation to practice teaching or supervision for social care students and should involve a number of interested bodies including front line workers, practice teachers, managers, educational and professional organisations and client groups and in near the future, registration boards. The Irish Association of Social Care Educators (IASCE) might be best placed to gather such a forum although there may be issues of representation for other groups. Another area that requires further discussion and development is that of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practices which are rarely made explicit within Irish social care practice and training. In addition, the importance of effective inter-professional and inter-agency working together has been highlighted in the Irish and international literature on numerous occasions and this needs to be incorporated in social care practice teaching and learning.

A further consideration is the assessment and evaluation of practice teaching and learning. There is significant potential here not just to involve students and practice teachers but also to give voice to service users. For example, Edwards (2003) and Doel (2000) argue for the involvement of service users in the assessment of social work students' practice placements. To consider innovative practice such as this requires social care professionals to engage more substantially with the teaching of theories for practice within the context of the agency and the client group. Further discussions could consider how practice teachers and agency managers could involve clients and students in an evaluative or reflective process.

Conclusion

To argue for practice teaching and learning as an intrinsic part of social care education and training is not a radical departure from the current system that educate social care workers. However, practice teaching marks a practical and conceptual shift on the part of social care workers and educators. This article argues that this should form part of a greater movement

towards professionalism in social care, one that nurtures critical reflection and attention to best practice and one that is client focused.

As with good practice in student supervision, the development of practice teaching is not without difficulties. Furness and Gilligan (2004) highlighted challenges for UK social work such as funding and training for practice teaching and learning as well as institutional support and acknowledgement for practice teachers. Doel (1996 and 2000) also notes the importance of the development of good models of practice teaching based on theory, creativity, professionalism, innovation and partnership. Whether our call to develop practice teaching and learning will be heeded or not, it remains clear that WBL is essential for the training of social care workers and any move to enhance practice in this area is to be welcomed. The model of practice teaching and learning outlined in this chapter will evolve as it is informed by further evaluation and reflection. The practice teaching and learning course provided by DIT will also have to take cognizance of developments in social care education and training and policy and practice requirements.

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