

# The art of becoming a social work practice educator

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**Abstract:** Through this practice note, I share some of my reflections and learning of becoming a practice educator. The experience has enhanced my skills as a social worker and team manager and now as a social work doctoral student. Based on my observations of supervision as a practice assessor and my experience of having many different managers throughout my career, I have noticed when social workers move into management without a practice educator qualification, the supervisory relationship experience is a different one than that of a practice educator – turned manager. I question why this is. Is reflective supervision only reserved for students? I am suggesting that it should not be. Each supervisor should be supported and enabled to connect with their Art, as supervision is a form of Art.

**Keywords:** practice educator; social worker; team manager; art; reflection

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## Introduction

I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. (Michel Foucault 1988)

Practice education for me is an opportunity that enhances connection, reflection and growth, both for the practice educator (PE) and the learner. Practice educators have a central role in the student experience of practice learning (Cartney, 2000). Whilst I am not the voice for all PEs, it is my view that many PEs will relate to at least some of my reflections and thoughts outlined. Becoming a practice educator has been a transformative experience for me. It has enabled me to recognise skills that I did not know I had. Over the years, I have proactively worked on developing and harnessing those skills. The experience has acted as a springboard for me to go on and do the many things that I am doing today, including writing this piece. My reflections will be shared through the lens of acquiring an Art. A word that is quite difficult to define, and many argue that it cannot be defined, probably because it is not one-thing and each person is crafting their own Art. I am referring to Art as a diverse range of human activity involving the senses, when applied with both attention and intention has the capacity to enhance relational practice. I totally agree with James, Mitchell and Morgan (2020) who share their experience of

social workers who embrace the concept of being continuous learners, investing in their own professional development and encouraging others to do the same are the most confident and happiest in work and the most committed to advancing the social work mission. (p. 34)

I am suggesting that practice education offers social workers an opportunity to do this and become an artist. One who uses their craft to build relationships and model best practice for future social workers and PEs.

## Art of motivation and learning

Step into this experience with butterflies in your bones; with a nervous feeling so beautiful you know you are doing something right. (D. Antoinette Foy, 2015)

Keeping not one but several reflective journals has been a practice I adopted since I was a student. I have found this to be such a helpful habit, which is now coming to fruition on my doctoral voyage. When looking back at my reflective journal when I decided to become a practice educator, I was struck by my entry – ‘To learn and grow’ and I had circled the word *Andragogy*. I have always been interested in human beings and their behaviour, which is why my first degree was in Psychology. I was curious about how adults learn, this includes learning for both myself and the students I was to go on and support. I was aware this was going to be a reciprocal learning opportunity.

The social work placement is a journey for both the student and practice educator. Both are impacting and being impacted upon through their interactions. My personal reflections have highlighted how it has continued to shape my practice, my supervisory skills, and ability to think critically and analytically. It has also tested my patience and resilience.

At the time of starting my practice educator’s course in 2013, I was respected as a good social worker, who many would come to for advice. I had, however, started to experience some discomfort and dissonance in relation to my social work practice and could relate to the findings from Marton and Saljo (1997). Their study led to the notions of surface and deep learning. I felt that having now been qualified as a social worker since 2007, I had been corrupted by the system I found myself in, where people became cases and questions such as how someone toilets and feeds themselves became the norm. I was ashamed at myself as this was not the practitioner I wanted to become. I was ‘*skating the surface*’ rather than engaging and attempting to meaningfully grasp the concepts (Biggs, 2003, p. 14). I wanted to refocus and engage in deep learning and encourage others to do the same. Deep learning is described by Biggs as

where the learner attempts to look within and beyond the initial task, text or learning opportunity. ‘The deep approach arises from a felt need to engage the task appropriately and meaningfully. (Biggs, 2003, p. 15)

This is when my quest and curiosity for best practice was re-invigorated. My desire to support best practice was not only for myself but to also ensure that students and staff can be supported to live well at work and bring the best version of themselves forward, as undoubtedly the impact of this will be of benefit to the communities and society we came into the profession to serve.

## **Art of reflective supervision**

Experience is not what happens to you; it's what you do with what happens to you. (Aldous Huxley, 1932)

Becoming a PE is instant, you are 'action learning'. One does not have to wait to pass the course before supporting a student and undertaking weekly supervision. One day you are just a social worker and the next day, you are a social worker and a PE, almost a manager / leader, and unspoken status is acquired. Having spoken to a number of PEs and as a practice assessor observing PEs supervisory sessions, I notice that mastering the Art of reflective supervision is a challenge for many. It definitely was a challenge for me initially.

Not wishing to disrespect the University PE courses but in my role as a practice assessor, where I observe practice educators undertaking supervision who are not all from the same university, there appears to be a disconnect in the academic world to the place of practice and it seems, much more needs to be done to bridge this gap. I would strongly suggest that as part of the course PEs are introduced to what reflective supervision entails through use of a variety of teaching methods, including theory, videos, role play and inviting a current practice educator who is in practice, rather than academia, to lead the session at the start of the course. I was invited in to do this once, but it was at the end of the PE course. The feedback from students was that the session would have been more suited at the beginning of their course. I think this is a useful topic to explore for a future paper.

In the following section, I will outline what has helped me become the practice educator I am proud to be today.

Firstly, I understood that reflective practice helps to develop knowledge for practice and professional life (Graham, 2017) and is therefore integral

to a field like social work, whether you are a student social worker, social worker or a practice educator. I knew I had to immerse myself in the deep learning mentioned above; rereading theory and consciously applying it to my practice. Donald Schon's book *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) was with me at all times.

I read up to date research to keep abreast current debates. I listened to communities speak about their lived experiences and became aware of emergent evidence. This facilitated deep learning for me. The knowledge acquired encouraged me to find 'My Brave' and try a myriad of tools and models in supervision. Moving beyond the models spoken about on the PE course, such as Gibbs (1988) and Kolb (1984), to experimenting with newer models such as Social Graces (Burnham, 1992), the Mandela model (Tadam, 2012) and several others, including the use of Siobhan Maclean's theory and reflective cards. Another great resource is the idea Mark Doel presents through his website 'Social work in 40 objects', which invites students to think about an object which represents social work to them. This not only helps to understand their motivation to come into the profession but often the conversation about the object gives a window into their associated values.

My love for psychology, philosophy and sociology has not waned and many psychologists remain in my community of practice. This interest has enabled me to learn and borrow tools from their discipline. During the pandemic, I have used tools such as The Blob Tree by psychologist Pip Wilson and The Feelings Wheel, inspired by the work of Robert Plutchick. I regularly use both in supervision to ensure students well-being and reflection on the work they do takes into consideration any emotional impact on them. I have used these tools to support beginnings and endings of placements.

For many of us, our only experience of supervision is the one we receive and my experience can be described as receiving mostly task-focused supervision. Being a PE gives you the opportunity to pause and rethink the purpose of supervision. This awakening cannot be compartmentalised and reserved for students only. Many of the facets are relevant to supervision of all staff: Beginnings, endings, identity, poverty, anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice. In my view, these discussions have to be a regular feature of supervision with all social work staff and not only reserved to have with students?

These skills in reflective supervision equipped me to speak about and undertake supervision from a perspective being echoed by social work

academics, researchers and national organisations. I have never looked back, only ahead to what else needs to be thought about to ensure that each PE and leader / team manager is enabled with the Art of Reflective Supervision.

## **Art of conversation**

The Art of conversation, like any art, is a skill of elegance, nuance and creative execution. (Z. Hereford 2011)

Social workers are generally known as conversationalists. This is what we do right? We meet people and we start conversations in order to find out their histories and what is important to them. We show adaptability, flexibility and are person centred in our approaches. These are the exact skills required as a practice educator who may go on to support several learners through their journey. Through practice education, I learnt the importance of applying a person centred approach to each learner I supported. This did not mean that I was unfair and some learners received a better deal than others. This was about acknowledging that no two individuals are the same just because they are doing the same degree and hold the same title of student. Being a PE enhanced my questioning skills. I thought about the different words I chose, the tone I used, and how this had to vary from learner to learner. I also paid attention to the social graces with which both I and the student entered the relationship. Three points of learning for me that contribute to the Art of Conversation are:

1. How useful visual communication tools, some I have mentioned above, can be in eliciting more detailed responses from learners. Through the use of visual aids you can move from beyond the very British response of, 'I am fine thank you.'
1. Asking the right questions, depending on the purpose and being clear on the purpose myself. What is it that I am attempting to achieve? There were so many times in my social work practice that I would come back from a home visit and think to myself, 'oh no, I forgot to ask x, y and z'. Becoming a PE gave me a real insight into practising different types of questions to achieve the end goal by using methods to clarify, enhance, funnel and adjoin.
3. The use of silence is another powerful form of the art of conversation.

Reflecting in action, I started to notice that my voice was often the dominant one in supervision. This stemmed from the uncomfortableness with periods of silences the need to fill that vacuum. I learnt that through allowing the silence to prevail, and being able to sit with that discomfort, in itself acted as the conversation. It gave thinking and feeling time and often the silence was broken by the learner.

An essential skill for the social work profession is being an effective communicator. This is also one of the most important skills for a leader. I heard someone say that leadership is not a position, it is a disposition. As a practice educator, as mentioned earlier, by default one finds themselves in a position of leadership. The disposition is your choice, how this is being received is by others is another Art, which is discussed next.

## **Art of feedback and reciprocity**

Make feedback normal. Not a performance review. (Ed Batista 2019)

Receiving feedback on a piece of work is integral to learning, especially when the person is expecting feedback (McDonnel, 2019). Whilst I believe this to be true for students, as they are expecting feedback throughout their placements through supervision, direct observations, and in their reports, my suggestion is that again this is not reserved only for students. I am a strong advocate for the feedback loop, suggesting that this is reciprocal. As a practice educator, I would utilise the shadowing opportunities, enabling the student to observe my practice and provide feedback to me. I recorded into the supervision template, feedback to supervisor and encouraged the student to feedback on how they are finding supervision. Not only does this help address some of the power imbalances, but it creates an environment of mutuality and creates habits. It also highlights that as PEs we have our own imperfections. Most of all it creates a culture of reciprocity. An essential ingredient as a supervisor.

Giving and receiving feedback helps us to develop our social work skills. However it is important to also know how to do this most effectively. Being a practice educator, I was able to trial out different tools which support us to both give and receive feedback. This has included the CORBS model (Hawkins and Robin, 2000), Negotiated collaborative model (Davys and Beddoe, 2010) and a model known as 'Steps To Accountability' introduced

in the best seller book *The Oz Principle* (Connors, et al., 2004). It is my belief that no student or staff should receive any surprises about their performance, their strengths and areas of development as this would be part of the culture in supervision.

My love for practice education and supervision has led me to create a number of tools myself to support practice learning. Recently I have developed a model for supervision called the 6 R's for supervision. I am proposing that the model is one, which encourages supervisors and supervisees to 'Think about their Thinking for supervision'. The 6 R's facilitate this and include, Regular, Relational, Reflective, Responsibility, Realistic and Reciprocal. The idea behind the model is that it can be used throughout supervision but if used in the first supervision session, it can help to discuss and plan how both the supervisor and supervisee will bring alive these R's through their supervisory relationship. Although the Regular R and Reciprocal R can apply to many things, it is apt in the art of feedback, in that feedback should be a regular occurrence through supervision, given by both the supervisor and supervisee. Most important message of the model is that supervision is done with you and not on you, for you or to you.

## **Art of letting go**

The river needs to take the risk of entering the ocean,  
because only then will fear disappear,  
because that's where the river will know  
It's not about disappearing into the ocean, but of becoming the ocean.  
(Khalil Gibran 1995)

Of all the Arts I acquired through practice education, endings was one of the ones I found most difficult. When one engages relationally and invests in their learner, there is an associated fear, a fear of letting go, a fear of an ending, not only for the learner but for the practice educator. So how did I acquire this art? Through the recognition that endings are as important as beginnings and one should start to prepare for endings as you begin. One thing we always have to remember as PE and supervisor is that we are always on show; we are modelling. The learner is watching and noticing and hopefully learning. So if we model best practice, that is

what the learner takes with them. A placement coming to an end means that you have supported another social justice warrior into the social work community.

Mastering the art of letting go has helped me in other aspects of my career as a team manager. I managed a team through Covid-19 of 15 people for one year, during which I applied the acquired Arts shared here and many more unmentioned. I always spoke about my end date to manage not only the feelings and expectation of staff but also my own attachments and endings. The 6 R's for supervision model mentioned above was a tool I developed as the above mentioned role's end date approached. It is model which can help you think and plan for endings. For example, if we take the Relational and Reciprocal R's, I had always informed my supervisees that we would have an endings supervision as endings are so important. I had shared that we would look at their satisfactions, strengths and areas of growth from their point of view, but also as their manager for one year, my views and feedback as well. I also asked if they would do the same for me and share their experience of me as their manager; my strengths and my areas for growth. This was my best experience so far of Endings supervision.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this practice note, I have attempted to share the abundant learning I have experienced in becoming a practice educator. I do believe that I would not be the kind of team manager I am today, if I had not had the opportunity to experience becoming a practice educator. Out of the many roles I assume, it remains my favourite.

Just as an artist brings alive her empty canvas, just as a performer breaths melody into her songs, a practice educator through their 'art of supervision' supports social workers into the profession. If you master this Art then it can serve you well in your career and as you leave your footprint, those you inspire leave theirs too.

'Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray.' (Jalal-Al-Din Rumi, 1997)

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