

Reflective practice: Perceptions of social work practice teachers

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Summary: This article examines the ideas and opinions canvassed of 40 experienced practice teachers about the concept of reflective practice. There is a focus on how they define the concept but also how they develop and assess this area with social work students. Through analysing themes from their responses a composite definition of reflective practice is suggested. Central characteristics and processes of the concept of reflective practice are identified from responses. It is suggested that this concept can be identified, developed and assessed in practice. The need for clarity of thinking about reflection by practice teachers is underlined.

Key words: reflective practice, social work, practice teaching

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Introduction

'Reflective Practice' is a phrase much discussed in literature on professional training and practice, not least in the domain of social work. (Yelloly & Henkel, 1995; Gould & Taylor, 1996; Ixer, 1999; Martyn 2000; Fook 2002; Thompson, 2005). Writing generally focuses on theoretical ideas surrounding reflection, often finding a lack of clarity about process and definition. If it cannot be defined how can we attempt to develop or assess this quality in students? Yet to practice teachers, I felt, the term was less complex; they seem to know what they were looking for. Therefore I decided to seek out their understandings about the concept of reflective practice and from this to attempt a good working definition of the term, to develop more detailed understanding of what it meant to practitioners and to understand how this quality could be encouraged in students.

40 experienced practice teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire and their feedback was analysed using an aspect grid – a way of identifying concepts and tabulating the number of times a concept is mentioned in interviews. This allowed insight into reflective processes and offered a partial response to those who might suggest that the concept of reflective practice is too complex to use helpfully in student learning and assessment. From a discourse on this concept, Ixer (1999) concludes

To assess students against a vague conceptual notion is inequitable because it is likely to oppress vulnerable learners who do not happen to fit into the assessors' own ideas of what they believe reflective learning to be. (p.514)

He continues later

We do not know enough about reflection or how its intricate complex cognitive approaches can enhance learning to be able to assess it fairly. (p.522)

This paper outlines an attempt to 'know more'. Firstly an excerpt from the responses given by practice teachers is cited to give a sense of the material gathered. This is followed by a discussion about reflection and its place in social work education. Then the research process and findings are outlined. Finally some themes, models and conclusions are drawn.

A practice teacher's example of learning to reflect through practice

I was co-running with a male student a group on masculinity for prisoners. The student was confronted with an image of masculinity that he had not met before. He had been member of a progressive men's group and had had an upbringing that had been sheltered himself from some forms of working class culture, but here he met up with young men with a totally different idea of masculinity. The prisoner's views of what being a man meant made this student think again and try to get a grasp of their perceptions because the purpose of the group was to get members to look beyond their own views to other perceptions. He realised he had to ask questions and discuss and not simply present his alternative viewpoint. This group involved briefing and de-briefing sessions between myself and the student and within these there were huge amounts of reflection.

(All responses are presented as a précis of the words of the practice teacher in interview)

The brief example above shows how live dilemmas about practice and values can be important triggers for thinking and learning. Behind the event is the practice teacher, questioning and coaching the students within what appears as an open and constructive relationship. This could be said to exemplify the ideas of Schon on educating the reflective practitioner (Schon, 1987).

The genesis of reflective practice in professional training

Debates about the concept of reflective practice in the twentieth century are well rehearsed. Building on the ideas of, amongst others, A.N. Whitehead (1950) and John Dewey (1933), Donald Schon tried to bring enlightenment to the processes of experiential learning and professional training through an emphasis on reflection. He suggested that effective learning to become a professional involved a process of knowledge and reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action afterwards (Schon, 1991,

p.303). He explored models of learning that used professional experts in the role of mentor with students in training. The process described is close to that of practice teachers working with social work students in placement. His ideas, whilst criticised for imprecision - in particular over when reflection takes place (Eraut, 1985; Moon, 1999; Ixer, 1999) - remain influential in many forms of professional education. Within current social work training, the use of reflection, to knit together theoretical concepts and value bases with complex practice, remains of central importance (Yelloly and Henkel, 1996; Martyn, 2000; Thompson, 2005).

The National Occupational Standards for Social Work (TOPPS, 2002) and the Standards in Social Work Education in Scotland (The Scottish Executive, 2002,) make constant use of words such as critical, critically analyse, evaluate, think, review, make judgments, balance and reflect. Requirements, for example, include 'Apply ethical principles and practices critically when planning problem-solving activities' (The Scottish Executive 2002, Standard 2, p.31) or 'Critically reflect on your own practice and performance using supervision and support systems' (TOPSS, 2002, Unit 19.4). These use the language of reflection.

There, therefore, may be little doubt that social work students are expected to be reflective, however, what is not clear is exactly what the all-encompassing term 'reflective practice' means. Jennifer Moon (1999) summarizes this well:

A further complication to the discussion of reflection and other cognitive activities arises from problems of vocabulary. The ability to be precise in academic reasoning on cognitive activities, such as knowledge, knowing, teaching and learning - and reflection - is itself marred by a vocabulary that is either overly extensive or not extensive enough.

Yet it appears to me that in social work practice learning, the term is more obvious than alien. From this I decided that a definition of a reflective approach to practice, drawn from those who educate students in practice might be illuminating.

Methodology

I sought a qualitative methodology which would be congruent with a reflective approach; (Good and Watts, in Parry and Watts, 1989; Maxwell, 2005; Reissman, 1994). My research aim was to draw out interpretations of a concept that implied an inductive approach. The congruence between a qualitative methodology and social work skills and values has been frequently highlighted. Experienced social workers in practice can be said to develop their expertise through an internalised and individualised form of research, Sheppard (1995), Papell (1996) and Sadique in Fook (1996).

I used a semi-structured questionnaire as the basis of a 40 minute interview. This type of a questionnaire poses a small number of open questions and those questioned are encouraged to talk around the area of the question. This method gave flexibility in gathering information, by allowing interviewees to follow up their own ideas and give examples, yet ensured a little direction when charting the complex seas of reflection and reflective practice. Responses are written down in *précis*, repeated back to the respondent and a copy of the interview sent afterwards for comment or correction. The questions encouraged a broad discourse on the definitions of reflective practice in the following areas:

- A summary or definition of the concept of reflective practice;
- methods used to develop/assess reflective practice;
- Aids or hindrances to reflection;
- Other ideas or illuminating examples.

To make sense of the data of the 40 interviews I generated an 'Aspect Grid'. An aspect was created whenever a concept, distinct from others and relevant to the research question, was noted. The number of times an aspect is 'mentioned' is recorded and gives an idea of the importance of that aspect over all the questions and interviews. 61 aspects were cross-referenced with 8 questions and a total of 878 aspects accumulated. Thus, a method, 'learning from mistakes', emerged in response to several questions. A new aspect was created and in every question for every respondent where this idea was suggested, a single point was given. Over the 40 questionnaires, the following count under the aspect, 'learning from mistakes' emerged (Table 1, overleaf).

Table 1

Question No ¹	2	3	4	5	7	8	9	10	11	Total
Mentions:										
'Learning from mistakes'	2	0	3	1	2	1	11	0	0	20

1, Of the 11 questions asked 9 generated responses in the four areas highlighted above. Learning from mistakes was identified particularly in terms of methods of developing and assessing reflective practice.

The overall total of mentions of an aspect from all 40 interviews appeared to be more important than the individual aspects cited under a particular question. It gave a general sense of the perceived importance of the aspect to reflective practice. In all, 61 aspects were defined and 1118 mentions of aspects noted across the 9 questions analysed on the grid from the 40 interviews. It allowed a broad yet detailed picture of what was seen as important to the development of the reflective process in students by practice teachers. An example follows of developing reflective practice alongside the aspects identified:

We had a student on placement who towards the end of her placement brought to supervision her concern about poor practice in a worker by writing about it in her reflective diary. She felt that the worker's approach was discriminatory. I encouraged her within supervision to analyse her concerns. She considered the worker and used her knowledge from psychology, particularly Erikson's theories on life cycles/developmental stages to understand better the worker and how change could be influenced. I then gave her the task of raising them (the concerns) with the worker. This was within the context of knowing myself the issues concerned and deciding the student should risk following through her concerns. She found the practice of raising concerns much harder than bringing them to supervision and had to give a lot of thought to it, thinking about the worker's background and perspective and the best kind of

CAPO (critically analyses the practice of others)
 SUP (using supervision)
 RD (Reflective diary)
 ADP (anti-discriminatory practice Discussed)
 TP (relating theory to practice)
 RI (working with risk)
 LM (learning from mistakes)
 CP (complex practice)
 CAP (critically analyzing own Practice)

approach. When she tried to raise the issues she found she could not change the perspective of the worker. However she did start to see the complexity of changing practice and was able to see the importance of not endangering her relationship with the worker and did not do this. It was this entire process that made the student think.

PDR (planning , doing and reviewing work)

Research findings: Making sense of the data

An initial aim of this research was to develop a working definition of reflective practice from the views of experienced practice teachers. I found that none of the 40 respondents gave a short response that could form a definition. Every respondent began with an idea that they qualified, added on to and gave examples of, for clarification; effectively they gave composite definitions:

I don't know what we mean by the term. To me it might mean that, in the work that a student does, they are able to think about what they are going to do and are conscious of why they are going to do it and they can consider thoughtfully the effect of what they have done and learn from it.

Frequently within a longer response a definition was attempted, for example,

... The ability to look at a piece of work that they have done and consider how they might have done it better.

However this was not the summary of the respondent's definition. There was not therefore a clear-cut definition but an amalgam of ideas in which a number of themes emerged. This amalgam had much in common with a post-modern approach to understanding terminology that is socially constructed, that avoids the empty rhetoric that can become attached to a term. Pease gives a good example of this when he considers the term 'empowerment', and notes that popular usage has diminished understanding and allowed it to be hi-jacked by specialist or political interests. (Pease in Pease and Fook, 2002, pp.150-156).

To make sense of feedback gathered on the aspect grid I grouped

the 61 aspects into four areas that centred on the different types of information that emerged:

- Characteristics of reflective practice in social work training;
- Processes involved in reflective practice;
- Contextual factors that helped or hindered reflection; and
- Methods used to develop or assess reflective practice

Characteristics of Reflective Practice

The most cited of aspects designated as characteristics or components of reflection were the use of *theory or knowledge* (52)¹ and the closely linked *relating theory to practice* (20). I did not seek to define the concepts of 'theory' or 'knowledge' for interviews, this could have given a better basis for considering findings. Together these aspects were cited 72 times amongst the 1118 aspects identified. An example is given,

As regards knowledge, I see it important for students, for example, to have a good grasp of human growth and development, whatever age group they are working with. You cannot practice in isolation from knowledge, particularly when you are working with children who cannot be fully responsible for themselves. Knowledge must be universally integrated into practice, not compartmentalised: one should reflect on knowledge and then modify or match it to the situation.

However, only two of the 40 respondents explicitly cited a theory when giving an example of developing reflective practice; theory was often noted in general terms. This suggests that there is an aspirational quality about the belief that theory informs reflective practice amongst practice teachers. They perhaps see it as fundamental to reflective thinking and yet are unsure as to how to embed it into developing reflective practice in a student. Secker (1993) found that one year after qualification two thirds of those interviewed never or hardly ever discussed theory in supervision. Triseliotis and Marsh (1996) found a diversity of theories influencing practice. However more in-depth questions indicated students were less sure of how or whether these theories were linked to practice. This is perhaps because we know so little about how theory informs work. Eraut (1985) notes that

Apart from the limited though valuable literature on professional

socialisation we know very little about what is learned during the period of qualification. Still less is known about subsequent learning. (p.117)

Until we understand more about this, he notes 'attempts to plan or evaluate professional education are liable to be crude and misdirected' (p.133).

The most prominent single aspect was *self awareness and the ability to work with feelings* (50). Several writers have considered this an important aspect of professional social work development (Fook, 1996; Bolton, 2002; Phillipson, 2002) as did practice teachers interviewed

... it is learning about yourself. You have to learn to put yourself in other peoples' shoes, whether clients or professionals.

The extreme disabilities of this client group can be difficult for them [students] at first, particularly their own feelings. They need to be open about feelings.

In the National Occupational Standards (TOPPS, 2002) and the Framework for Social Work Education (Scottish Executive, 2003) there is, perhaps, insufficient indication that self-awareness should be an area for learning for students. Practice teachers as examiners may, therefore, be using criteria outside of the standards for the new qualification.

The two aspects, *Values* (38) and *anti-discriminatory issues* (13) were highlighted in total 52 times out of the 1118 mentions of aspects. This was often construed as important to reflective practice because of the debates that surrounded issues

practitioners have to be prepared to debate values.

It is important to open up debates about values – to tease out issue.

For example a student coming here can be frightened or have negative feelings and there can be conflicts of values every day.

Values emerged in a significant number of examples of developing reflective practice. For example

This student was keen to meet her learning objectives and to do this decided to tape an interview with a client. I asked her whether she had sought permission of the client and she said yes she had asked him. I then asked her if she thought that

her client really had any choice in the matter and I could see she was beginning to think through the issue of choice. We had spent time earlier in the placement considering what it was like to be in the position of a client, how their perspective may differ and the use and power of language. She went away and thought through this and I noticed in the end she decided to provide evidence in another way and saw this as an example of her being prepared to rethink her practice.

Deacon (2002) emphasizes the discourse potential of values issues. It seemed clear that values debates are an important part of reflection.

Two aspects, *creativity* (5) and *intuition* (3), were only nominated a few times. I would have expected a higher profile in the often individualistic profession that is social work and so note this out of interest. They are discussed by a number of writers in literature about reflection (Whitehead, 1950; Argyris and Schon, 1974; Schon, 1987; Bolton, 2002; Phillipson, 2002; Hogan, 2002).

The processes of reflection

A range of aspects indicated that practice teachers identified reflective practice as process-like in nature. It was seen as a cognitive process, part of thinking about practice, most commonly *critically analyzing own practice* (50) but also *transferring learning* (15), *having clarity about role and task* (11), *articulation ability* (10) and *taking responsibility for own learning* (11). The following is an example of thinking through role and task

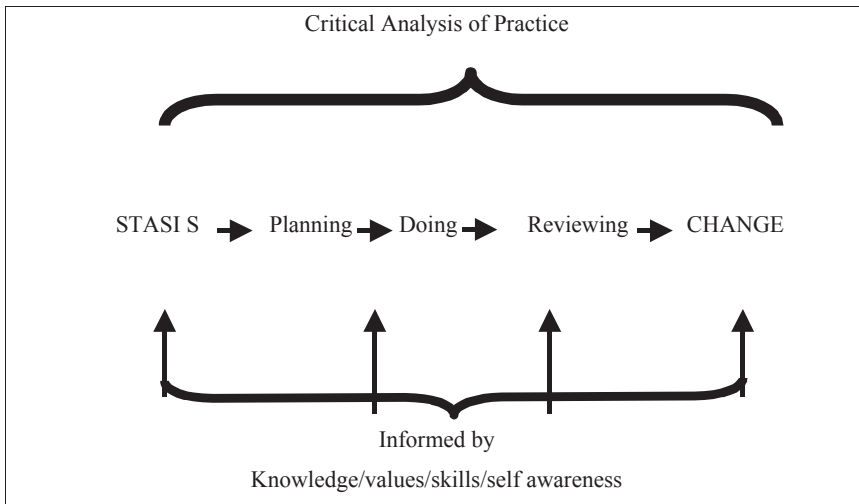
This student was on her first placement in a very informal project with people who had severe mental ill health problems and where her role seemed practical. We spent a great deal of time discussing the social work task and the purpose of her work. She later described to me how she had spent time with a patient having a cup of tea in a tearoom. He began to open out and talk about his family, his links with them and what he did with them. As she was recounting this she began to make her own links with theory, the purpose of her work and its outcomes. She saw her achievement as this patient began to be able to communicate more fully with the project. This process entailed looking at task and purpose, techniques, use of self, her own family experience.

The above example, in common with others, emphasises that reflective practice is both a cognitive process that frames and makes sense of individual pieces of practice and a cognitive ability that develops over time. Some practice teachers also saw reflection as a process of *planning doing and reviewing* (32) or simply the *planning* part alone (32) or a knitting together of the concepts of *knowledge, values and skills* (23). These findings, and the noted difficulty that those interviewed had in thinking through a definition, suggest that models of reflection or frameworks that can help practice teachers understand and explain reflective practice should be highlighted, in particular those that have built on the concept of learning from doing and added inputs from knowledge or from the coaching of others such as the model developed by Jones and Joss in Yelloly and Henkel (1995). A composite model, that draws out the characteristics and processes identified above could clarify understandings about the concept usefully for practice teachers. This model suggests a theory of metacognition (Eraut 1994), an overarching model that draws together different cognitive processes or components.

A composite definition of reflective practice

From analysis of the aspect grid, a number of frequently mentioned characteristics or components of reflective practice were extracted. Together they form a composite definition, 'critically analysing complex situations through processes involving planning, doing and reviewing whilst using knowledge, skills, values and self awareness.' There is a clear, but unstated, implication that this will lead to changes in action and understanding on the part of the practitioner. This might have the ring of a definition drawn up by a committee but it does justice to the breadth of the concept and encapsulates the views of experienced practice teachers. Figure 1 overleaf expresses this definition in the form of a model of reflective processing.

Figure 1



Helps and hindrances in developing reflectiveness

Findings revealed many factors that helped or hindered reflective processes. Many practice teachers emphasized that *the setting* (25) is important in encouraging a student to reflect. This could be the nature of the team or institution or client group.

In a prison a student may see a different value base in a prison officer this drives a student back to their own value base and to becoming aware of the influence of the political scene on social work.

In a similar vein some practice teachers noted that reflection could be inhibited because of *environments or teams* (14) that did not encourage thinking.

There needs to be a reflective environment within the placement agency or team. There is sometimes a cynical and anti-intellectual culture in social work agencies that is not helpful to this.

A large number of respondents saw *competence-driven learning and new managerialism* (23) as preventing the development of reflection.

I am very concerned that social work is moving away from a reflective profession and that we are in danger of losing everything that is important to good social work practice and becoming managers.

I am wary of being too mechanised about competence.

These findings highlighted the workplace cultures in social work that can discourage reflectiveness. However, in general, aspects helpful to reflection were identified, for example, *interaction with other professions* (14).

A health visitor on being asked by a student to provide leaflets to a family about safety in the home refused on the grounds that the family were too hopeless a case. This situation threw up a number of dilemmas for the student, helped her think whether she should challenge the decision as well as seeing the differing value bases that might exist between the professions.

A further help in developing reflective abilities was becoming aware of the *service user perspective* (18). The latter area, was seldom about gaining direct service user feedback but involved the practice teacher encouraging the student to see the situation from the perspective of service users and carers. When giving examples of generating reflection only two people gave an example of service user feedback setting off this process. The much higher profile of user involvement throughout the Standards (TOPPS, 2002; Scottish Executive, 2002) will, perhaps, challenge practice teachers to make better use of this area of reflection.

A cluster of factors that encourage reflection centred on the practice teacher and student themselves. *A student without reflective abilities* (22) was obviously a problem but so too was an *unreflective practice teacher* (16) or one who was *too busy* (20). Finally *trust* (10) and *openness* (15) were seen as highly important in developing reflection.

You need to give the student permission to speak openly in supervision and this is about creating an atmosphere of trust.

Methods of developing and assessing reflective practice

There was generally little confusion amongst practice teachers when they were asked how the capacity to reflect was developed on placement. A variety of methods were used. Although separate questions were asked about the methods of developing reflective practice and those of assessing it, it was evident that practice teachers' responses to these questions were very similar; sometimes the responder simply reiterated that they used all the methods mentioned in developing reflective practice in assessment of it.

The most cited means of developing reflective practice were the two aspects 'supervision discussion' (60) and 'probing questions' (22), mentioned together 82 times. This underlines the importance of the one-to-one discussion that can take place about practice on placements in which the practice teacher prompts the student to consider ideas or alternatives. The importance of this method could get lost in the sheer obviousness of discussion as a central part of the learning process.

The most important method is the use of questions, a systematic probing into the depth of any piece of work, getting the student to think what they are doing and why. This helps the student ask themselves the same questions in practice; but not everyone is comfortable with this way of working – it may depend on the learning style of the student

The *reflective diary* (59) was also a prime tool to develop and assess reflection. Bolton (2002), writing with trainee teachers in mind, notes that journals should be 'carefully introduced and facilitated when they are used on a course' (Page 169) otherwise she perceived they wrote about daily frustrations rather than using reflexivity and integrating theories and values. Practice teachers interviewed in this research were aware of the dangers of over descriptiveness and worked to develop reflective styles in students, for example '*The use of the diary. In the first part of the placement time is taken getting students to understand the purpose and method and to get them to see it should not be descriptive but that there should be thinking and feeling content. When I go through it I put 'why?' and 'how?' everywhere to get them to think.*' Bolton and other writers on reflection generally commend the use of a journal (Schon, 1991, Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985, Moon, 1999 and Bolton 2002) and it was clearly seen as central to practice teachers in this research.

Alongside aspects mentioned above, *written work* (48) and *process recordings* (30) were surprisingly popular; *observation of practice* (34) and *colleague feedback* (22) were deemed important and show the broad scope for developing and assessing reflective practice. *Direct teaching* (4) was low in the list of methods perhaps because of the many alternatives available.

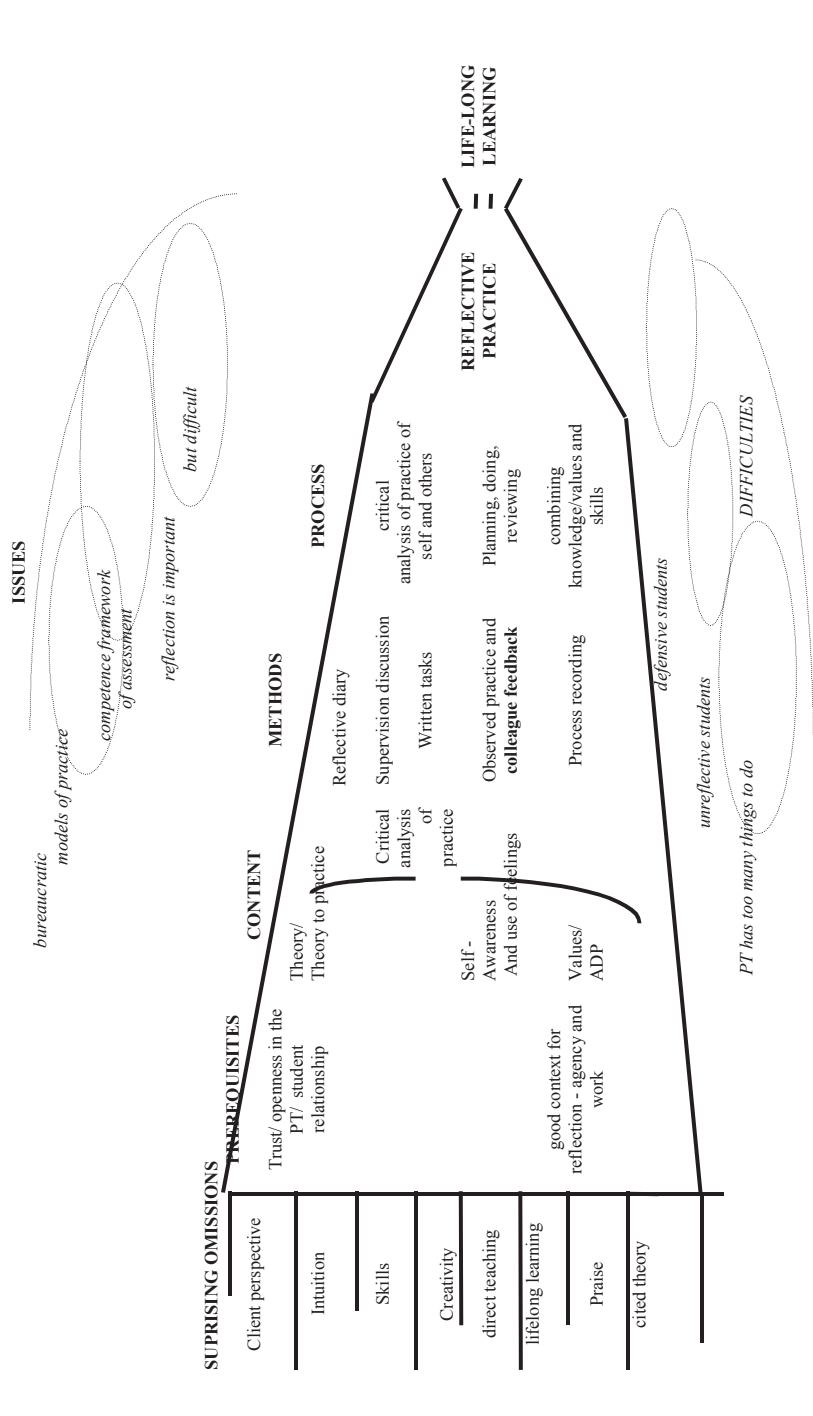
Although many practice teachers used the same means to assess reflective practice as to develop it, they used direct observation of practice, feedback from colleagues and written work more frequently for assessment than for learning. It emerged from the interviews that practice teachers were confident in proposing an array of methods of developing and assessing reflective practice.

Additional points

Further issues were identified from responses. A number of respondents stated that it was *difficult to fail a student* (9) for inability to reflect, perhaps because of the complexity of this area. This may contradict views that practice teachers were confident in describing reflection. However a slightly different view was suggested elsewhere: 'A failure in this area would become apparent in many ways on a placement. ... If I was struggling to find evidence for reflective practice it must be heading for a fail'. The problem of a *defensive student* (7) who was not open to learning was noted. 'If a student was not acknowledging or accepting where they might have gone wrong I would be concerned – inflexibility in residential work would raise questions for me, particularly in areas around values and self-disclosure.' Some practice teachers volunteered that *being a practice teacher helped the practitioner to think* (6) Bell and Webb (1992) also found this as a pre-eminent reason for practice teachers choosing to practice teach.

The following model (see Figure 2) was drawn up to pull together all generalisable findings from this research. It tries to encapsulate the dynamism of reflection and the sense that it is based upon certain prerequisites, components and methods. The 'omissions' are not part of findings but my own observations about what I might have expected but did not find in interviews. The outlying 'issues' and 'difficulties' are included to represent practice teachers thinking outside of the direct process of developing reflective practice.

Figure 2. A model for developing reflective practice derived from experienced practice teachers



Conclusions

The following draws together findings and themes:

- In defining the concept of reflective practice my findings suggest that practice teachers see it as a composite of processes and abilities. *'A critical analysis of planning, doing and reviewing professional work, informed by knowledge, values, skills and self-awareness.'* From this thinking the actions of a professional worker may be changed. Whilst this definition does nothing to make the concept simpler it makes its richness evident. It also gives a clear view of the component parts of reflection as gathered from practice teachers.
- Practice teachers had a clear sense of how they developed and assessed the concept of reflective practice – reflective diaries, reflective discussions, written work and practice itself. These methods confirm the breadth and depth of reflection available in placement settings and show that practice teachers have an array of means of describing and justifying their development and assessment of reflective practice. They go some way to refuting a view that the concept is too complex to be fairly assessed, although it is clear it remains a difficult area for some.
- Two models of reflective processes have been suggested in this paper. One gives a composite definition of reflective practice. The second encapsulates most findings from the research. Both can help give clarity to practice teachers when they develop and assess the abilities of students in this area.
- The absence of named theory from findings in interviews is discouraging and emphasises the gulf in learning between classroom and placement. However theory is clearly present in unnamed form for students on practice learning; this area, perhaps, needs further exploration.
- The centrality of debates and dilemmas surrounding values issues and anti-oppressive practice as an ingredient to engender reflective thinking is further confirmed.
- An understanding of professional self-awareness and the ability to work with feelings may need to be considered and its place within professional within social work training made more explicit.

My overall findings were that the importance of a reflective approach to practice is alive and well in learning for social work students on placement. However we need to learn more about reflective processes in placements in order to build on the opportunities for learning and to be able to assess the ability to reflect more accurately.

Note

1. Numbers after an aspect denote the number of times the aspect was identified over the 40 interviews.

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