Learning 'at work' during social work education:
An example of practice learning opportunities from Sweden

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The aim of this article is to describe and analyse the learning processes of Swedish social work students during and after periods of workplace-based learning. The article describes the process in which the practice learning opportunities that the students have been involved in are reflected upon, discussed, problematised and theorised, both in a series of workshops and via the process of the narrative description of critical incidents. Practice learning opportunities form an integral part of studies of social work in the Social Pedagogy program at the University West in Sweden, where a reflective approach to both campus and practice learning has been developed. In presenting the analysis of the reflective approach to studies of social work the article draws on both Scandinavian and international research and presents Säljö's theory of situated learning and Nielsen & Kvale's theory of *Mesterlaerer* in the analysis of the critical incident narratives of two individual social work students.

Key Words: social work education, critical incidents, practice learning, reflexive methodologies, situated learning, *Mesterlaerer*

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Introduction

'Knowledge is power' is one of the commonest mantras in our society, and thus the question of *how* knowledge comes about is one that is commonly addressed. One example of this type of research is the ' Workplace learning and creation of knowledge for professional social workers/ social pedagogy workers' project being carried out at the University West under the management of Drs. Elsebeth Fog and Lars Rönnmark, Senior Lecturers at the University. The project forms part of the university's major research profile of work-integrated learning. One part of the research project is an attempt to gain an understanding of students' processes of learning and knowledge acquisition during periods of workplace-based learning.

Within social work education both in Sweden and in other countries, the practice placement (practice learning opportunity) has become a central part of developing students' competency, creating a secure knowledge base and thereby instilling confidence as a professional social worker (Hogan, 2002). In particular, researchers at University West want to know more about how students learn and accumulate knowledge during the periods of their education that take place outside of the classroom in the form of practice learning opportunities. Our ambition is that this project will contribute to the development of practice teaching and practice learning.

The aim of this article is to describe, by means of practical examples, how two individual students experienced learning during their 'practice learning opportunities'. In order gain as clear as possible a picture of the learning actually taking place, 'critical incident analysis' methodology (Napier & Fook, 2002) has been applied. A series of workshops took place in which both professional social workers and students partici-pated. The students where asked to describe an incident which they specifically remembered from their practice learning opportunities. The students and their practice teachers have individually and collectively, reflected on the incidents and then attempted to theorise on what took place during the workshops. We can see this as a process of ongoing review, change and review again. The students were also able, with the help of the workshop group, to position their set of reflections into a more formally theoretical framework. Napier and Fook (2000) suggest that this type of process involves a

reflective approach to practice [and] offers some insights about a different way of conceptualising the relationship between theory and practice, as an ongoing process in which theory and practice constantly inform and develop each other' (p.2).

It was this relationship we hoped to explore by using the students' own descriptions of their experience.

A 'different pedagogical forum': The workplace instead of the lecture theatre

Social work students find themselves in a different pedagogical environment when they begin their practice learning opportunity; this part of their program of study takes place in the workplace. When learning takes place on campus the preconceptions, probably of both students and their teachers, are of sitting, listening and note-taking during a lecture, participating in a seminar or sitting in a group-room, discussing an assignment with other members of their study group. But what are the expectations of students about to start the part of their program of learning that does not take place at the university?

Roger Säljö, Professor of Educational Science at the University of Göteborg, has studied the situated nature of learning. Säljö believes that all human acts and interaction are situated in social practices and, further, that learning too is determined by the situation we find ourselves in and the opportunities that it presents. According to Säljö (2002), all of our acts are

determined by our own knowledge and experience and by what we, whether consciously or unconsciously, assume that any specific situation allows or demands of us. (p.139)

For teachers striving to create learning opportunities both inside and outside the confines of the campus, these are ideas of great interest, especially with regard to how the students themselves view the workplace learning environment and what it has to offer them. However, Säljö also emphasises that to try to account for all human activity in terms of 'a product of context' would be overly reductive and would

radically undermine the value of situatedness as a tool of interpretation. Furthermore, it is always important to be aware that contexts are continually changing and never exist independently of human action. Thus, a student's learning is a part of the context that she is in; there is never first a context and then a process of learning. Rather, it is the context that is a part of the learning.

All social work students encounter a 'new' situation when they engage themselves in the workplace-based modules of their program. This is true even for those students who have backgrounds as care assistants or other social work experience, since they have not actually been a student in the workplace. Learning and the creation of knowledge is not just about mastering a range of specific new skills or understanding more about certain types of problem. Learning and knowledge are not made up of a collection of separate units (Säljö, 2002). If there are gaps in the students' understanding of basic concepts, it will make it more difficult for them to understand new concepts, based on new material, that assumes the possession of knowledge from previous theoretical studies (Ramsden, 1992, p.65). In this sense, the knowledge that students have acquired in previous semesters of study forms an important theoretical base for their workplace-based studies. This theoretical base is a precondition for an interactive learning that takes place in the workplace and which begins to make it possible to connect and integrate practical experiences into a theoretical framework. If the theoretical knowledge the student has is not explored during the practice learning opportunity, the risk is that the student experiences the two different 'pedagogical arenas', that is, the university and workplace, as two entirely separate worlds.

Another aspect of workplace-based learning that requires students to reflect upon this rather different form of learning is the tension that is created between, on the one hand, being in a pedagogical environment and, on the other, the practical demands of the workplace. Students have to cope with both the expectations of their workplace colleagues and their clients, as well as the demands of the university, often in the form of practice assignment. Students are able to cope with this new and demanding situation in which they find themselves by, according to Säljö, relying on previous experience. He argues that

> with the help of previous experience, we know how we should react – we learn to recognise the framework of demands that are characteristic of any given situation' (p.129)

Ramsden (1992) too recognises that students have to adapt according to the demands placed upon them. They adapt, he points out, 'to the requirements they perceive that teachers expect from them. They usually try to please their lecturers' (p.62). The different expectations of the workplace and of the university can, however, on occasion, result in parallel learning processes where the learning objectives set by the teacher and the day-to-day demands of the workplace remain unreconciled and separate from one another. These two, sometimes conflicting perspectives of social work knowledge, can create a learning environment in which the student can feel insecure about her own competence and, not surprisingly, her learning process is effected negatively.

Critical Incident 1: Challenging structures of power

The first critical incident is recounted by Anna, who undertook her workplace-based studies at a secondary school for pupils with social and educational difficulties and who could not be accommodated in the normal school system.

Now, with hindsight, I can see that I chose a critical incident that sheds light on issues of power and the exercise of power in school. It was situation where I was challenged both in my role as a workplace-based student and as an adult.

We were on a study visit to the local fire station with four of the pupils. It all started when the four of them began to play dumb and refused to say anything. They wouldn't speak and began fooling around. In the end the firemen managed to trick them out of their self-imposed silence. After the visit two of the boys remained behind, sitting on the steps outside the fire station smoking. We tried to get them to get into the minibus to go back to the school but they refused point blank. We tried everything to get them to come but in the end we got in the vehicle and drove away. Forty minutes later they turned up at the school. They had walked. They thought that we would just drive round the block and then come back and get them. They were very subdued and were very quiet and confused when they came back.

Afterwards I have thought a lot about why we did this. Would I, given a free hand, have done the same thing? But I don't really know how we could have reacted differently - I don't think that they would have got in the vehicle even if we had waited for a very long time.

Another similar situation that I remember well was when I repeatedly chose to stand my ground when they came right up to me and told me to move. One boy pushed his nose into my face and told me to move, but I chose to stand still and not to budge in order to set a boundary.

Now, afterwards, when I reflected on this incident in one of our workshops I can see that 'power' 'boundary setting' and 'uncertainty' emerge as very clear themes. The pupils at the school consistently challenged the adults .... but what did the adults do about it?

There are of course a number of aspects about the incidents I have recounted but what makes me most curious is why I have chosen to analyse them from perspectives of power and boundary-setting. Another aspect of relevance here I think is that I chose to write my practice assignment on power and the power relations at the school. Where have I learnt about all of this? Pia Westin Hellertz (1999) has, I know, written about the ways in which social work students describe the sources of their knowledge and one of these that emerges very clearly is the student's own personal experiences. If I draw on my own experiences of school as a source of knowledge, then the exercise of power by adults emerges very clearly. I can also draw on experiences of how, as a pupil, I felt insignificant, invisible and, in almost every way, inferior to the adults in the school. Another area of my previous experience that has remained with me is from the time when I worked as a youth team leader and coach for a team of young footballers. I remember that setting boundaries was always important but, just as important, was the way in which you did it, so it didn't seem like you were actually setting boundaries. My previous experience of working with young people has contributed to my belief that boundaries are important, especially when working with those kids whose problems mean that they have fairly chaotic life situations anyway. I remember too that my own beliefs about rules and boundary-setting were confirmed when, on the course, we spent time studying socialisation.

Some theoretical reflections on Anna's critical incident

When thinking about what Anna has to say about her own reflections upon work practice and the links that she makes to her studies and own prior experience, one particular aspect of learning seems to emerge; learning in the form of self-awareness. Self-awareness is an important ingredient in personal development and is in the foreground of the curriculum in our social work education program. In particular, knowledge about how the student's own life experience is included as a part of

learning is something that is emphasised time and again throughout the program. The strength that we gain from our own personal range of life experiences is valuable knowledge. Thus, when placed in an unfamiliar situation, such as a workplace-based learning environment, making use of personal experience becomes an important learning strategy. Anna's use of this strategy emerges clearly in her description of her 'critical incident' meeting the challenge of working using social-pedagogic methods in a school for children with special social and educational needs. She draws on knowledge gained not only from her degree course, but also from her own experience.

It is the opportunity to be able to reflect on the relationship between individual, prior experience and ongoing learning that makes critical incidents so enriching. Thus, by means of a structured series of reflections on how past experiences shape current learning and work practice, social work students gradually become less inclined to work in accordance with their just their own agendas and are more aware of the need to create strategies that are more clearly focused on clients' needs.

'Projection', a term commonly used in social work to describe the way in which individuals transfer their own needs and desires onto others, is a problem that confronts nearly all students who begin the workplace-based learning modules on the program. Increasing their self-awareness, by, amongst other things, making use of critical incidents, is an effective way of approaching the issue of transfer and reducing the potential risks associated with it. Napier and Fook (2000), for example, describe how they use reflection as a method of getting students to come to terms with the influence of their own prejudices and emotions. In the same way that Anna was asked to write down her reflections on a critical incident, Napier and Fook instructed their students to use writing as a form of critical reflection. 'What happened', they report

> was quite remarkable. Many students reported breakthroughs in their practice, in situations, which had stalemated, or presented problems for them, sometimes over years. Some sessions were moving as students came to acknowledge the role of their own emotions and personal needs in the way they had approached or interpreted the situation. (2000, p.3)

If we take Anna's critical incident as an example, most experienced youth workers will instantly recognise the notion that young people have to 'test you out', to find out who you are. For some students this

means that, during their workplace-based learning, their focus becomes almost exclusively fixed on their own personal development. This can lead to a sense of insecurity that is manifested in the way they interact with the clients and the professionals they come into contact with, even though the student may be a confident, self-assured person in most other situations. As a teacher, I have often encountered this phenomenon when talking informally with students. Surprisingly, many confide as to how surprised they have been over the way in which their self- confidence in their own knowledge and abilities can be so dramatically 'reduced' in learning environments both on campus and in the workplace.

Turning again to Roger Säljö's ideas about the nature of context in situated learning, we can perhaps find a way of conceptualising the insecurity that can affect students during their periods of workplace-based learning. For Säljö, context and learning are inseparable

> We are not influenced by the context, since all of our acts and our understandings are a part of the context. There is no pre-existing context and subsequent act, but rather the case that our acts are comprised within, create and re-constitute contexts (p.135)

For me, he seems to be suggesting that our acts, and our learning, derive from the context that they in turn have also created. Thus learning is dependent on *who* we are (what prior experiences we bring to a new situation) and *what* we know (the prior knowledge we bring with us) since they are, in Säljö's model, necessary contextual ingredients.

Another aspect of the situatedness of learning that Säljö stresses is that the point of departure for all of our acts is, in addition to our own knowledge and experience, what, whether consciously or unconsciously, we assume that the situation demands, permits or makes possible. This, of course, is interesting when we consider how students themselves experience the demands and expectations that are placed on them during their periods of workplace-based learning. How did Anna experience her role in the school? Was she supposed to react in accordance with her prior knowledge and experience when targeted by the young people, or was she to adopt a passive role as a 'student' and simply 'observe' and 'learn'?

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) describe an important aspect of workplace learning in terms of the presence of 'communities of practice'. In their view, learning takes place in a social organisation in which less

experienced, or novice participants gain knowledge from those who are more experienced. Participation in a joint activity, according to Lave & Wenger can be described, symbolically, as the process by which an 'apprentice', by means of her legitimate, albeit peripheral, participation in a joint activity, gradually accumulates the knowledge, skills, norms and values of the profession. During this process the apprentice's positioning within the community becomes gradually less peripheral until she becomes a fully-fledged member of the profession.

How then can this useful model be applied to workplace-based learning in social work? What form does the student's legitimate participation take? For Anna, we can perhaps account for her uncertainty at the fire station in terms that her position of 'apprentice' had not been sufficiently well defined at the outset of her placement. Another way of looking at the situation could be that the school staff were also uncertain about what to do at the fire station and that their uncertainty impacted on their 'apprentice'. Being an 'apprentice' Anna probably felt that she had no mandate to act on her own initiative and thus her insecurity became compounded yet further. It might be worth pausing here to consider questions concerning the nature of the balance of power between communities of practice (in this case the school staff) and their 'apprentice' (in this case Anna) during periods of workplace-based learning. Might students be able to respond with a greater degree of assurance if their 'apprentice role' is better defined and the expectations of the community of practice more clearly articulated? Furthermore, Anna's critical incident serves perhaps as a good illustration of the need to make members of the community of practice aware of that their 'apprentice' is engaging in a process of responsibility-taking, possibly for the first time, and the likely effects of this. Perhaps if the school staff had been more attuned into Anna's capacity for taking responsibility, she might have experienced the situation as less insecure.

In the situation where the pupil pushed his face into Anna's in an attempt to get her to move, Anna was alone and her responses were conditioned by her awareness of the importance of setting boundaries. In this scenario there was little if any uncertainty and her response was both immediate and, essentially, instinctive. Säljö's (2000) conception of situated learning and the way in which the individual consciously or unconsciously grasps what the situation demands of her, or the opportunities that it presents, provides us, it seems to me, with a conceptual framework for making sense of these two situations. It also

explains why Anna reacted with uncertainty in one, but not the other. Anna's experience of working with young people provided her with the knowledge that young people expect adults to hold their ground and her decision to stay put was automatic. As a result she did not need, in the absence of any perceived expectations from any members of the community of practice, to hesitate before deciding what to do.

Critical incident 2: Professional identity, status and ethics

Britta, who undertook her workplace-based studies at a family centre, recounts the second critical incident.

During my period of workplace-based learning at a family centre I, on one occasion, had the opportunity to do a study visit to the local child psychiatric unit. I went there with two social work students on the 'Socionom'[1] program from another university (Östersund, in the north of Sweden) who were doing their workplace learning at the local patch office. This alone made me a little bit nervous. I did not know these two girls and this would be our first meeting. We were going to meet a man, a social worker there - we can call him Anders. We went into his office and we started off by saying a little bit about the different programs that we were on and where we were doing our workplace studies. He was a socionom and had studied at the same university as the two other girls. It was not long before the three of them, on his initiative, started talking about the different teachers there and which teachers they had all three had and so on. I have in my personal diary from that day written the following: 'socionom' students had probably, in his eyes, a higher status, and Anders made it very clear that he would be very glad to have them at the child psychiatric centre for their next placements.

I remember too how I had asked what type of degree was needed to get a job at a child psychiatry centre. The response I got was that you had to be a 'socionom' and that for me, who would be a social pedagogue and not a socionom (even though I studied social work) the chances of getting a job were slim. I need to point out here though that much of what I remember taking place at the visit is coloured by my own interpretations and emotions. If another student from our course had been there then it is not at all certain that they would have experienced the visit in the same way that I did. Anders started to talk about the centre and

how they worked. Unfortunately I don't remember too many details about what was said but, looking at the diary-entry I wrote afterwards I see that I had written that I felt a certain degree of scepticism. For instance that Anders spoke perhaps too glowingly, for example, about medication for children with different neuro-psychiatric diagnoses such as ADHD and so on. I do remember that on one occasion he talked about treating patients 'on a conveyor belt basis'. His use of that expression quite took my breath away. I couldn't believe that someone working with children and young people could possibly use such an expression. I also remember how he said that he would select 'cases' for treatment at the centre. If, he said, choices had to be made he would avoid anything 'tricky' or 'demanding' and instead choose a 'case' that appeared to be easier and that would 'go quickly' .

I am of course aware that when you start working it is not perhaps that unusual to have such feelings, and that some tasks must be more demanding than others and that sometimes this can get the better of you. What I thought was strange, though, was that he was sitting there telling us all of this! Honesty is all well and good, but my reaction was as to whether or not he was/is the right person for the job. His way of expressing himself about people who are in need of help and support was totally alien to my way of looking at work with people in difficult circumstances. At the same time, I must add, I don't for a minute assume (or at least I hope) that he is representative of all the staff working at the centre.

Now that I have had time to reflect on my reactions to and emotions following the study visit I can connect them to what we have learnt on the program. Because we have read so many texts and had so many great discussions in our work groups, I have begun to acquire the ability to see things in different ways and from different perspectives. During the first two years of study we spent a lot of time talking about professional approaches, encounters with others and differing views on the individual - discussions that never seemed to end! So, it seems to me, that, in order to be able to acquire and maintain a common professional approach in any workplace or organisation, it is necessary for everyone at that workplace to be included and to discuss how that common professionalism should be created and what it should comprise. It is important to discuss what different concepts actually mean for each and everyone and, of course, what it will entail for their clients and those who make use of the services they provide.

When I think back to that study visit from the perspective of writing out a critical incident, it seems to me that what I am most keenly aware of is the way that I have learnt in my studies of social pedagogy to have a respect for, and to gain an understanding of, individuals and to critically analyse society. I have acquired new perspectives and concepts that now mean that I can better

understand the things that I encounter, often seeing them in a different light than I had done previously.

An important background factor to my chosen critical incident is that the family centre where I carried out my workplace-based study had, during the first part of my placement, uncommonly few families registered at the time and with whom they were working. Not surprisingly perhaps, this allowed me to focus on the working methods and practices of the social workers to a much greater extent than I might have been able to under more 'normal' conditions. I could start to understand how they were working from theoretical and value-based standpoints without actually being able to understand on a more practical level what it was they were in fact doing. I chose to write my degree thesis on values and ethics in social and treatment work with children.

Some theoretical reflections on Britta's critical incident

One of the values of education that takes place in the workplace is that students gain the opportunity to create and begin to develop a professional identity. Klaus Nielsen and Steinar Kvale (1999) who by using the Danish term *Mesterlaerer*, which might be translated as 'apprenticeship: learning by social practice', discuss the acquisition of professional identity. They are inspired by Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger's theories on situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation. They suggest that the four main areas of *Mesterlaerer* consist of learning in a community of practice by legitimate peripheral participation, the acquisition of a professional identity, learning without formal teaching and assessment by means of practical work. Kvale and Nielsen (1999) argue that the adoption of a professional identity is one of the most important aspects of *Mesterlaerer*. According to Kvale and Nielsen

> learning about the many different skills required [by a professional] is a step on the way towards their eventual acquisition and, as such, is decisive in terms of establishing a professional identity. (p.29)

Thus, the workplace-based student not only gains the opportunity to establish a professional identity but can also, during the duration of the placement, grow and develop within her new identity. The acquisition of a professional role also means that it becomes possible for the student, as an insider, to begin to *understand* and critically reflect upon the values

and perspectives that are prevalent within the profession. Britta's critical incident illustrates how she has reflected upon and questioned the values expressed by another professional social worker.

One of the significant themes that emerge from Britta's critical incident is the role and functioning of reflection as a tool for creating knowledge. By using the method of writing a diary during her practice learning opportunity, she was able to go back and reflect again on her thoughts directly after the chosen critical incident was discussed in the workshop. According to Jack Mezirow (1981) critical reflection is one of the most important elements in adult learning. He describes reflection as being comprised of three different dimensions; *objects of reflectivity*, *consciousness* and *critical consciousness*. The first of these, objects of reflectivity, is, in Mezirow's model, subdivided into three components: *perceiving, thinking,* and *acting.* As part of his explanation of this first dimension, he makes the point that

> we can simply become aware of a specific perception, meaning or behaviour of our own or habits we have of seeing, thinking or acting. This is an act of reflectivity. (p.12)

Britta's reflection demonstrates how, through reflecting on the events of the study visit through the medium of the critical incident, she was able to gain a more complex understanding of the texts on values, ethics and professional approaches that she had studied during the campus-based part of the program.

Mezirow's second dimension is consciousness, which again is a composite of three differing descriptions of reflection; *affective reflectivity*, *discriminating reflectivity* and *judgmental reflectivity*. The first of these, affective reflectivity, relates to the way in which we experience emotionally that which we describe objectively. Britta's critical incident narrative bears witness to her dismay over the way that a member of the wider professional group that she aspires to join expresses a number of value judgements. She tells how she felt 'worthless' because she would only be a 'social pedagogue' and not a 'socionom', a qualification she felt was afforded a superior status[2]. It is interesting too to note that Britta herself is at pains to point out in her narrative that she is aware that her response is an emotional one and that not all of her fellow students might have reacted in the way that she did. The second sub-composite included in the consciousness dimension is discriminating

reflectivity. This refers to the way in which we evaluate the cause and effects of our understandings, thoughts, actions and habits. When doing this, according to Mezirow, 'we assess the efficacy of our perceptions, thoughts, actions, and habits of doing things; [we] identify immediate causes; recognise reality contexts (a play, dream, or religious, musical or drug experience etc.) in which we are functioning, and identify our relationship in the situation' (p.12). This situation demonstrates the relationship between Britta's focus on professional identity and her visit to the psychiatric centre. Britta tells how she experienced that her future professional identity as a social pedagogue was put into question when she met staff at psychiatric centre who stated fairly categorically, at least as far as Britta was concerned, that to work there you had to be a socionom. Judgmental reflectivity, in Mezirow's model, relates to the form of reflection in which the individual is aware of her own values and value judgements when she analyses any given situation. It involves, according to Mezirow,

> making and becoming aware of our value judgements about our percep-
> tions, thoughts, actions and habits in terms of being liked or disliked,
> beautiful or ugly, positive or negative. (p.12)

In her critical incident narrative Britta says that 'when he talked about treating patients 'on a conveyor belt basis' his use of that expression quite took my breath away'. Her opinion of the social worker she met was obviously very negative due in no large part to the values that he expressed. She goes on in her critical incident to describe feeling 'left out' when he and the other two social work students began to talk about the degree course in social work at Östersund, which was a common area of experience for all of them. In one of the workshops held after the workplace-based study period, Britta ventilated the thought that her experience of the visit and her opinion of the social worker that she met might have been 'coloured' by this initial experience of exclusion. She also thought that have had in fact caused her to write in her diary that 'socionom social work students seemed to have a higher status'. When going over these events again in the workshop, Britta this time put things slightly differently. She said that she felt that they 'did not seem to be talking the same language' and that she had difficulty in 'decoding' their dialogue.

In this way, through writing out a critical incident narrative and

discussing it with fellow students in a workshop, Britta was able to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the study visit.

Mezirow calls his third domain of reflection critical consciousness or, more simply, 'becoming aware of our awareness and critiquing it' (p.13). It too has a number of sub-components; *conceptual reflectivity*, *psychic reflectivity* and *theoretical reflectivity*. In order to explain what he means by conceptual reflectivity, Mezirow gives the following example: Suppose, he says, that we are told that 'John is bad'. This bare statement is not enough and, amongst other things, we might consider whether 'good' or 'bad' are adequate concepts by which to understand or make any value judgements about John. In opposition to conceptual reflectivity stands psychic reflectivity. This, according to Mezirow, is what

> leads someone to recognise in [her] self the habit of making precipitant judgements about people on the basis of limited information about them, as well as recognising the interest and anticipation which influence the way we perceive, think or act. (p.13)

Britta's reflections about the working climate at the psychiatric centre reveal the way in which she critically examines her own value judgements about the staff member she met and attempted to account for them in terms of the situation that pertained at the centre where she was doing her placement. Here we can see both psychic and conceptual reflectivity in operation. Britta recognises that her initial judgement of the situation required further reflection and, upon reflecting further, she tries to gain a more nuanced understanding of, and explanation for, her judgements of the situation.

Britta's narrative reveals that her understanding of social work is sufficiently developed that she is aware that certain working situations can cause staff to experience certain types of case as more taxing or demanding more of them than others. What she questions, though, is whether a professional social worker should be so forthright about this in conversation with students. Returning to Kvale and Nielsen's ideas about the acquisition of a professional identity (Kvale & Nielsen, 1999), it is worth posing the question as to whether students are not perhaps equipped, ready or even willing to meet the reality of the workplace. We all know only too well that symptoms such as frustration, stress and 'burn-out' are ubiquitous in the day-to-day work of social workers the world over - see for example the work of Fook , Ryan and Hawkins

(2002) and Theorell (2003) and perhaps these are areas that must also be properly addressed in undergraduate education. However, It is more difficult to get a grip on psychic reflexivity as it is directly personal. Identifying our deepest-seated prejudices requires a safe and secure structure and, for ethical reasons alone, I have chosen not to probe into this level of reflection in a critical incident narrative of the sort written here.

Mezirow's final sub-dimension in the domain of critical consciousness he calls theoretical reflectivity. Theoretical reflectivity, Mezirow explains, is the process

> by which one becomes aware that the reason for this habit of precipitant judgement or for conceptual inadequacy is a set of taken-for-granted cultural or psychological assumptions which explain personal experience less satisfactorily than another perspective with more functional criteria for seeing, thinking and acting' (p.13). Mezirow's belief is that the process of theoretical reflectivity is both central to adult learning in that it allows the individual to change perspective and, as such, he argues 'perspective transformation becomes a major learning domain and the uniquely adult learning function. (p.13)

By reflecting on her critical incident, both in the form of a written narrative and together with other participants in our series of workshops, Britta has had the opportunity to conceptualise and understand the relationships between theories of professional identity creation and the development of professional identities in practice.

Conclusion

There is little doubt, it would appear, about the value that workplace-based learning has for students. All of us who work with educational programs where periods of 'practical learning' are an integral part witness the changes in perspective that so often take place during these periods. However, it is perhaps a little too tempting to just assume that workplace periods are 'good' for students without actually analysing what it is about these placements that is actually beneficial. Having analysed these critical incident narratives and taken part in accompanying workshops, it seems to me that this form of learning leads to the intensification of two different areas of knowledge.

Firstly, the change of pedagogical arena – from the campus to the workplace – provides an unrivalled opportunity for personal development. The opportunities to gain increased self-awareness and to be able to confront and question personal values and beliefs mean that individual development is much more intense during workplace-based periods of learning than it is during equivalent periods of campus-based learning. The values that underlie students' attitudes and approaches to both professionals and service-users become transparent.

It is of course important to remind ourselves here that personal development, for a social work student, is not simply a desirable by-product of a university education, but, rather, is integral to the creation of a professional identity and the acquisition of professional skills. The curriculum for the current program in social work at University West states, for example, that: 'In order to be awarded a degree in social pedagogy students must have acquired the requisite knowledge and skills, and have demonstrated personal development and empathic ability as well as the ability of critical analysis, to a level required by those working in the field of social pedagogy'.

The second area of knowledge that often becomes intensified during workplace-based learning is the student's awareness of her own learning strategies. This occurs when, in a workplace learning environment, the student is faced with a variety of different sources of information, as opposed to the more limited types of information, primarily theoretically based texts, that can be accessed on campus. The increased awareness of individual learning strategies and individual approaches in selecting information from various sources is extremely valuable for students, both on their return to campus-based learning, where the pedagogical model used is based on the fusion of the student's own experience with those of others (both theoretical and practical) and, not least, in their future professional careers.

Notes

1. The social work education for social workers (Socionom) and Social Pedagogy is 3 ½ years and both lead to a Bachelor's degree in social work. The area of practice has traditionally differed. A qualified social worker (socionom) works within the field of statutory work, whereas a qualified

Social pedagogue works more directly with people in different institutional settings (except in teams for the elderly and people with disabilities where they often have a managerial role).

2. Traditionally in Sweden there had been a status discussion between the two different social work courses. Social pedagogic education has been a diploma course that now has changed to a bachelor course. The two forms of qualification to become a qualified social worker give you the competence to work in all areas of social work.

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