

The journey towards professionalism in social work: The development and assessment of practice learning

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Summary: Achieving clear evidence of competent professional practice for social work students is a challenge for social work educators. This issue became more critical in the UK with the onset of the DipSW outcome-based competence framework which, we argue, limited the process of learning and development for students and practice assessor assessments. This article argues that the (unintended) consequence of this approach is a less analytic process for developing practice and consequently, for many students, less well developed assessment and reflective skills. Therefore, the article attempts to explain these issues and offers an example of a process at Brunel University that we believe was significant in helping students develop much better analytical and reflective skills than had happened with the DipSW and is happening with the National Occupational Standards currently. We believe this process enables educators to be more confident about their assessment of students' ability to practice at an appropriate standard and to make that recommendation.

Keywords: assessment; development; practice learning; competence framework; National Occupational Standards; outcomes

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Introduction

In 1989, a new qualification in social work, the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), was introduced in the UK by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work¹, (CCETSW, 1989), and revised later (CCETSW, 1995). This had, at its core, the assessment of practice learning through a ‘competence’ framework. The qualification was succeeded by a ‘new’ degree in social work, starting in 2003, (Department of Health, 2002) and a new set of standards for practice assessment, The National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Social Work (TOPSS UK, 2002) which was, in effect, another ‘competence’ framework.

The DipSW competence framework was an outcome based system (as is the NOS) which, in itself, has some merits. The assumption of previous qualifications that acquiring knowledge and values will necessarily lead to the outcomes (skills) required to practise was open to criticism. An outcome-based approach (now termed learning outcomes) meant that learning and teaching could be geared towards the end product – the practice skills desired – which constituted an important aim. Clearly, it is important that social workers are professionally competent. However, it was not competence that was the issue but the competence framework and the means by which students were assessed. This paper argues that the outcomes became the means to assess students rather than the ends to be achieved and that this has had a profound effect in limiting students’ development. We argue that the (unintended) consequence of this outcome focussed approach is a less analytic process for developing practice in qualifying education and training in social work and consequently, for many students, less well developed assessment and reflective skills. These are the very skills desired by many employers and line managers and, thus, this is not an argument about ‘academic’ skills but the skills which are the essence of good practice.

Therefore, these experiences of the DipSW framework led colleagues at Brunel University to devise a different framework for assessing practice learning for the implementation of the ‘new’ degree in 2003. This paper examines the experiences of the DipSW and describes the process which informed the development of practice learning assessment for the ‘new’ degree at the university which attempted to

address the problems. This is particular to England since by this point, the UK had devolved power to its four constituent countries and policy documents for the degree varied. The paper has international relevance, however, in relation to countries utilising or considering utilising a competence framework and has general relevance for all social work educators in relation to how students can be assisted to conceptualise their practice. The implementation of the practice learning assessment for the 'new' degree describes a strategy across 'college' and 'practice' to help students integrate their learning and develop as professional social workers.

Background

The DipSW heralded a change from previous social work qualifying programmes which were not based on a national framework of specified outcomes (though the Certificate of Social Service, CSS, did have a national framework). They were developed from the particular experience and creativity of individual course/programme staff and were more focussed on inputs rather than outputs. Nevertheless, many would argue and we would agree from our own experience, there was quite a degree of consensus around the knowledge, skills and values that were seen to be needed to practice and some attempt by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) to promote this (experience of authors). The DipSW was introduced with the statement that

it needs siting in the wider arena of training for national vocational and professional qualifications being developed by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). CCETSW Paper 30, 1989, p.5)

The language of 'competence' was used but without the NVQ/S (Scottish) VQ type framework. However, Paper 30 was revised in 1995 (*Assuring Quality in the Diploma of Social Work, Rules and Requirements for the DipSW*) specifically to introduce this type of framework with six 'Core Competences', Practice Requirements and Evidence Indicators that resembled NVQs. (The term 'performance criteria' was used for the NVQs rather than 'evidence indicators'.)

The 1995 competence framework was developed by a method called functional analysis whereby agreement is reached through consultations with stakeholders (especially employers) about what the main purpose is of a particular job and what the functions or Key Roles ('Core Competences' in the DipSW framework) might be. These are then broken down into smaller Units ('Practice Requirements', DipSW) and then the Units are broken down into elements ('Evidence Indicators', DipSW) which are the outcomes that can be demonstrated. Thus, the CCETSW framework used different terminology but this was derived essentially from the same method. Significantly, the NVQ terminology is now used in the National Occupational Standards, being determined by the same functional analysis method.

Despite the requirements for the DipSW detailing knowledge, skills and values necessary for competence to be demonstrated, there was much criticism at the time and subsequently. O'Hagan (1996) sums up several authors' criticisms as centred on the view that,

Competence-led social work training has narrowed the assessment process to a 'tick-box' exercise. Students become obsessed with finding work enabling them to produce evidence for each unit of competence; in other words it is a reductionist approach which ignores the holistic and dynamic complexity of social work and assumes that overall competence is the sum total of achieved competences. (O'Hagan, 1996, p.14)

O'Hagan disagrees with these criticisms and he and colleagues utilise the competence framework to demonstrate, with a range of students' cases from practice situations, how the framework can be based on knowledge, skills and values, evidenced in the work. (His book was revised in 2007, and outlines a similar approach to working with the NOS.) However, the authors of the current paper agree with the previous criticisms. We do not take issue with what O'Hagan and colleagues do (which we were unaware of at the start of the revised process) but these criticisms corroborate our experiences during the years of the DipSW, through working at a variety of universities, from external examining, and anecdotally from colleagues, students and practice teachers/educators.

What was largely presented in students' 'portfolios' for the DipSW competence framework (and is currently presented for the NOS in the majority of programmes) was an abundance of large portfolios, with

evidence which is partial across competences and is often descriptive. The portfolios do not usually give a sense of the work done in the users' situations (unless there is a holistic piece included) and very little sense of the progress of the student through the placement (unless specifically required e.g. in a practice assessor/educator's report). It is worth noting here that the NVQ frame work was conceived as an assessment model to accredit people's work and did not necessarily entail training or development. The need to provide evidence for a range of indicators/elements necessarily fragments the material and leads to descriptive work, often statements of claimed performance rather than evidence from the users' situation. This is not a criticism of students because it is quite hard to convey depth of understanding and critical analysis in this type of presentation. Whilst there are a variety of constructions for portfolios and some contain useful evidence, some useful pieces of work and some reflective/conceptual work, the majority of what goes into a portfolio in gathering and presenting evidence of competence (and the NOS) is wholly disproportionate to the learning gained and is often detrimental to the student's development.

Even more importantly, the time spent on the evidence gathering for the competences (and NOS), rather than the understanding of the user's situation, seems to have impeded both the analytical understanding of students about their practice work with users and, consequently, the development of their practice skills. At the same time, the lack of an holistic view has prevented a real understanding by the practice teacher/educator of the students' personal/professional achievements and has limited the students' understanding of professional roles, responsibilities and processes. Thus, the challenge for the 'new' degree was how to make the portfolios work, both in respect of analysing users' situations and in assessing the students' competence to practise.

The revised process for the 'new' degree

Therefore, from the outset of the planning for the degree at the University in 2002-03, it was decided to formulate more analytic pieces of work to be carried out in practice along with the usual requirements for structuring practice placements but not the usual evidence gathering via the NOS. As mentioned earlier, the student had become the focus

of the previous DipSW competence framework (and subsequently the NOS framework) where evidence was gathered to meet outcomes for student performance, not necessarily the users/clients. Thus, a different focus was taken, placing the emphasis on analysing users' situations to provide a more informed service for them, which then develops students' knowledge, values and skills in the work. Student performance could be assessed through this medium but also by a self evaluation based on the work.

Work was developed for both the practice and college situations with a clear purpose of integration between the two. Written material by way of pro-forma was produced for the practice portfolio in placement, for college at the end of the placement and also college based work was undertaken to integrate theory and practice through individual (one to one) tutorials and practice (small group) seminars.

Practice based work

The Practice Portfolio was comprised of usual elements of assessment for practice placements - Direct Observations, Feedback from Service Users and Carers and Practice Assessor's Report - but this article concentrates on three other elements of assessment. This type of work will not be new to many, though the formulation might be.

Two of the key elements developed were pro-forma for placements: firstly, a Work Summary (WS) for analysing user (the term is used to imply service user and carer) situations; and secondly a Critical Self Evaluation (CSE) linked to the Work Summary. The point of having two separate pro-forma was to focus one of them on work with the users' situations and the other on the student's development. By making the starting point the user, students needed to use theory relevant to that situation as a whole and therefore to develop better reflective, analytic and assessment skills. The work with the user was then examined in the CSE where the student needed to use reflective processes to evaluate his or her performance in that user situation. Both elements evidenced reflective and analytic processes which not only enhance the work with the user but support professional development as well. The third element was a Reflective Evaluation, pulling together practice and college work at the end of the two long placements (Levels 2 and 3 undergraduate, Years 1 and 2 postgraduate) and submitted to college.

This work provided evidence to meet the NOS, being presented holistically but cross referenced to the NOS, Values Statement and GSCC Code of Practice by way of grids to be completed². There was a grid for both Units and Elements of the NOS but it was only mandatory to complete the grid for the Units. In the text of the WS and CSE, students stated the Key Roles/Units evidenced by putting a reference in brackets (e.g. KR 2/Unit 6 – and the element if this grid was used). These pro-forma were used for the two long placements. The intention was that the students would complete these pro-forma for most of their work, the format being adaptable to analyse work at an earlier stage of intervention e.g. ‘one-off’ situations, at a later stage e.g. after several meetings/contacts or at the end of the work. Students could then select the three (five for final placement) best pieces from both WSs and CSEs for inclusion in the portfolio. There was also provision for submitting other work from the placement if there was a gap in evidence but this was a provision only to be used minimally.

The argument here is that students can only develop their practice skills if their work with users develops and we believe this was limited by the fragmented process of the competence framework. Students are not necessarily developing skills with users if they are focussed on collecting evidence about their own functioning. In the Brunel process, students had to focus on work with users and crystallise their thinking by writing up the work holistically (WS), not writing about users to demonstrate their own performance as in the DipSW. The CSE was the mechanism to focus specifically on their own performance.

The pro-forma set out headings with full accompanying guidance notes and extracts from these notes will give something of a flavour of what was to be achieved.

Work Summary

Referral: Record of work undertaken; Relevant background information; Core assessment; Intervention; Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice/values demonstrated; evaluation/ending contact; bibliography.

The *key objectives* were

to provide a coherent account of the work demonstrating understanding, analysis and the capacity to critically reflect on your practice, showing awareness of the strengths and disadvantages of your approach/interventions.

The essence of the WS was to complete a core assessment, working in partnership with users and other professionals, demonstrating

... how theory, knowledge and values have informed understanding of the situation, e.g., theory about ageing/dementia where an older person (or people) is/are having difficulty managing; theory about family dynamics where a child is in trouble the social context of people's lives and wider sociological/social policy information.

Students were expected to take a critical approach to theory, seeing it as an aid to their understanding. The overall ability to be demonstrated was for students to think conceptually about their practice. This was aimed at developing students' analytical and reflective skills and it can be seen how this type of work would help them analyse and understand user's situations in a much more holistic way than in describing work they had undertaken to meet the 'competences'.

Critical Self Evaluation

Situation: personal and professional response; user(s) response; relationship(s) with user(s); assessment; anti-discriminatory and anti – oppressive practice/values; intervention; learning points; transfer of learning; bibliography.

The *purpose* of the evaluation

is to help you reflect on a piece of work that you have undertaken and to link this to your professional development. It is intended to be a critical evaluation in which you are expected to consider your approach to the service user situation and how ethics and values underpin your practice. It is important to demonstrate learning, not necessarily successful work, which is not always possible. The task is not about 'proving' you have done the work so much as the pros and cons of the process.

The *process* includes 'To what extent were you directing the situation i.e. in appropriate control of the process', including the provision of examples.

The role of placements

One benefit of the use of the WSs and CSEs was the need for practice assessors/educators to allocate the type of work that would provide learning opportunities to enable students to meet the requirements for these pieces of work. As mentioned, the minimum number for the portfolio was three and five for the two placements respectively but more pieces of work could be undertaken throughout the placement. Thus, as students undertook increasingly more written work, the learning and teaching became a more specific incremental process than usual. The work also altered the balance of the learner teacher relationship as the student took more responsibility for achieving learning and demonstrating this within the WSs and CSEs.

The requirement to discuss integration of theory in each practice piece forced the learning process to be transparent and therefore more easily assessed, acknowledged and valued. Where learning was not being achieved the practice assessor/educator could support the identification of learning needs and teach the student accordingly. This refocused the student from being concerned with tasks achieved (typical in the DipSW) towards the professional stance of reflective practice which focuses on the processes by which tasks are achieved. The practice assessor/educator therefore was more able to report upon and evidence achieved knowledge, skills and values and recommend areas where learning had still to be achieved.

Practice and college based work

Reflective Evaluation:

Aim: sources of information; scope; structure (1. learning needs, 2. the learning process; 3. action plan); references.

The *Aim* of this piece of work

is to help you reflect on your learning throughout the year and to make links across both academic and practice work which will facilitate your personal and professional development. Reflection is a key mechanism in the learning process, an important feature of which is to think about your own thinking, often called 'reflexivity'. This requires you to become more

aware of what you already know and can do and how you build on this or integrate new learning into what you do The level of understanding required for a degree in Social Work means that you need to transform your existing knowledge, integrating old and new knowledge and apply this to new knowledge contexts.

The '*Sources of Information*' helped students think about their experiences across the whole programme

You can draw on any aspect of your practice experience e.g. Work Summaries, Critical Self Evaluations, Supervision sessions or any aspect of academic experience e.g. assignments, practice seminars, tutorials. Reviews or assessments will be of particular importance. The Student Development Plan is an important continuing mechanism for evaluating and planning your personal and professional development and should provide a good source of information.

Students also had to formulate an Action Plan '*to identify existing strengths and further areas for self development.*

The writing of the Reflective Evaluation required students to focus on their overall development throughout the year, both academically and professionally, which included their achievements and areas for continued development. Through this task they were able to build the process of identifying their strengths and areas for further development, their learning styles and the skills and knowledge that they had acquired and how these issues impacted on their practice. This also gave the students an opportunity to anticipate Continuing Professional Development needs and provided a platform for life long professional learning.

All these elements required students to address Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive practice and the power dimensions between user and self. All work had to utilise theory explicitly and provide a bibliography for texts cited. Thus, these pieces of work, together with the other elements of the assessment, gave ample scope for demonstrating the NOS. However, students needed considerable help in working with these elements which was provided both in placement and college.

Practice Study

There was also a Practice Study, based on a placement situation,

submitted to college at the end of each long placement but this had been a feature of the programme for many years and is not commented on here specifically.

College based work

Practice Seminars

Students needed to develop clarity about the requirements for writing their WSs and CSEs and to develop their reflective skills. This work also highlighted the necessity to provide rehearsal opportunities that would facilitate a process of 'deep learning' and positively guide the students towards good practice, giving them skills and confidence to professionally manage the demands of placements. The curriculum needed to include opportunities to enable students to develop skills and be supported to make sense of who they are (professional role), what they hear (theory) and what they see (practice). Consequently, the programme introduced rehearsal through practice discussion, the Practice Seminars, which would then facilitate both the work with users and writing up the work.

The main goal was to rehearse and develop the student's ability to reflect on and in practice. Schön (1983, 1987, 2002) informs us that the process of reflection can be either a process of reflection – on – action which involves reflecting on your actions after the event, or reflection –in – action, a process of thinking about what you are doing while you are doing it. Additionally, we are informed that reflection is central to effective social work practice, but only if appropriate action results from this reflection (Horner, 2006). The process of reflection therefore requires students to question their approaches to practice. Many writers also argue that reflection is a questioning approach to facilitate critical examination and exploration of their thoughts, experiences and practice in order to develop or hone existing skills (Horner, 2004; Parker and Bradley, 2007). A number of reflection techniques were utilised to enhance these processes and to facilitate the students' transition to a reflective practitioner.

The seminars comprised students of particular (individual academic) tutor groups and facilitated by that member of academic staff so they could link knowledge from practice placements and college.

The programme had a concurrent placement pattern (some days in placement, some days in college each week of the placement period) so linking could take place on a weekly basis. However, what follows is the process used by two of the authors, as not all tutors necessarily had the same approach to the seminars.

Through the course of the seminars, with the use of experiential learning exercises, students were given tasks of presenting, analysing and evaluating their practice. They were also encouraged to identify their strengths and areas for further development as well as key learning points. Students took it in turn to present to the group a specific theoretical approach that they had either used, or could have used, in work with service users. In order to ensure that students were able to benefit from this task, they were asked to first identify the theory, its origins, the main points of the theory in relation to what it attempts to explain, before going on to demonstrate how they applied it and to evaluate its effectiveness in relation to the particular context in which it was applied.

Early in the seminar process, some students struggled to provide a transparent account of their involvement with service users in terms of their initial approach to the service user, as well as the process and outcomes of assessment and intervention. They were prone to make prescriptive (limiting), bland statements about their practice, such as 'I carried out an assessment', without interpretation or analysis of either their approach or the conclusions drawn from the assessment process. In some instances, where they were able to describe their practice, they struggled to illustrate the HOW and the WHY elements i.e. precise examples of what they did and why they used a particular approach. Similarly, as they began to attempt to integrate theories, they were able to articulate theoretical principles which would underpin their approach to practice but evidence of the application and evaluation of these theories was lacking.

As their confidence in consciously applying theory to practice improved, when they reflected later they began to identify the theories that they were using during their practice. Laing states that,

without time for critical reflection we may become dogmatic in theory and keep repeating ourselves in practice. We may even keep repeating a story about what we repetitiously do which does not even match what we do; especially if we do not have sufficient time to scrutinise what we are actually doing. (Laing, 1969 p. 4, quoted in Martyn, 2000)

As their analytical and evaluative skills increased, the students frequently became able to retrospectively identify other methods that they could have used in their work with service users. One of the benefits of this approach is that students were able to learn from each other because this approach exposed them to a wider array of theories and personal attitudes than they might otherwise consider. The presentations were also effective in bringing to light important concepts which are often considered by some students to be abstract and of little relevance to day to day practice. The practice seminars supported the surfacing of values and exposed implicit underpinning theory and consequently, old practice ideas could be evaluated and reviewed. The end result was that students reported that their contact with service users became less tentative and their confidence improved overall.

Another aspect of the tasks was the requirement to consider their approach to anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) and anti-oppressive practice (AOP) with service users. This was both in terms of the theoretical concepts that informed their strategies as well as their application of these concepts. In this regard, they were challenged to provide concrete examples of the strategies that they considered to be ADP and AOP and to critically evaluate the outcome of using these strategies. Therefore, they developed a real understanding of the power differentials between practitioner and service user and of the agency. As Thompson points out:

What we have to recognise is that, given the significance of meaning and the power of interpersonal and social interventions to shape and redefine meanings, how we practice can be crucial in terms of influencing a person's processes of meaning making. (Thompson, 2009, p 102)

The role of the tutor

The role of the tutor became central within the informal learning and evaluation process. The tutor provided a safe learning relationship which enabled students to be transparent in their approach to work and therefore more able to identify their learning needs in their developing professionalism. It is argued that learning in general will best occur and be integrated within a safe learning relationship (Cozolino, 2006) and this is what the tutors aimed to develop. The practice seminar also provided an arena for the tutor to assess suitability and professional development. Feedback from the seminar facilitated what the tutor

could do jointly with the student in the individual tutorial and helped more accurately target the student's personal/professional development needs. This supported the students to evaluate their achieved learning and future learning needs.

Feedback from stakeholders

Students

Students have commented positively on these tools as very helpful in their professional development. Some recent feedback which gives a flavour of the benefits includes:

The format enables me to analyse a piece of work in a structured way..... Additionally, the pieces help me to familiarise myself with the Key Roles, Units and Values of the NOS.

I found them helpful in getting me to think about the social work tasks in a holistic and step by step approach prompting thinking about theory, evaluation, critical and reflective thinking, power differences and more.....encouraged me to think about all aspects of the social work situation.

It benefits my development as I always think through the whole intervention process with service users including respecting culture and diversity and the communication process.

I found them very useful in supervision for day to day case management and reflection on theoretical approaches....but when I came to write things up, the greater distance from the actual cases and service users allowed me a greater understanding which often led me to question my actions and other professionals far more rigorously than I did at the time.

Enabled me to develop my ability to work independently and increased my self confidence..... Writing the Ws allowed me to organise my ideas and argue my points in a logical manner and communicate them effectively....

Skills and techniques that apply to writing the work summaries can easily be applied to other forms of structured presentations such as report writing.

Changes were made to the initial requirements for the portfolio, reducing the amount of work and recent feedback also included some critical comment about this. The reductions in the number of pieces that could be included and the reduction in the size of the word limit were felt to be limiting on range and the depth of work that could be produced. Some of this feedback has been taken on board and word lengths have now been increased.

Practice assessors/educators

This process is used and has been found to be effective by many practice assessors/educators, particularly those who qualified before the DipSW came into being. However, those people who qualified with DipSWs also embraced the Ws and CSEs as more holistic teaching tools. Practice assessors/educators have commented that, under the DipSW competence framework (and currently the NOS), evidence was only required of tasks undertaken, not evidence of learning. They felt this led some students to think that once they had achieved the task, that was the end product and this militated against a developmental approach. The requirement to focus holistically on work with service users was not there formally in the DipSW and they felt these 'new' tools required students to focus on service user situations and their own performance in relation to these. Therefore, practice assessors/educators felt the tools enabled the assessor to have more in-depth insight into the students' practice and development needs.

External examiners

When the new process was introduced in 2003, the external examiners, who were familiar with the DipSW, were able to compare this process with the previous competence framework. They were very complimentary and commented that the Ws and CSEs facilitated understanding of the students' developmental process in a much better way than the evidence provided for the DipSW. They were able to see a more holistic account of the work with users and the critical and analytical skills demonstrated by the students.

Discussion

The theory of andragogy (adult learning) suggests that adult learners often approach learning in a practical or pragmatic way based on their goal or expected outcome (in relation to the focus of this paper, the goal of obtaining a social work qualification at the end of their course). Taking this approach means that they will often focus specifically on the tasks that they perceive they need to complete in order to pass their assignments or to achieve higher grades). In this regard, it has been argued that they are also strategic learners (Biggs, 1987; Tait et al., 1998; cited in Biggs, 2003; Entwistle, McCune & Walker, 2001). These strategies were particularly noticeable in providing evidence and evaluation of practice under the previous competence framework where many students would take the shortest possible route to presenting evidence of their competence. However, one limitation of a pragmatic approach is that learning often takes the form of a surface or superficial approach (Marton & Saljo, 1997). This involves 'skating the surface' rather than making concerted attempts to understand and grasp concepts. Similarly, Biggs (2003) describes this process as 'cutting corners' to convey the idea that the job appears to have been done properly but in reality, it has not. The opposite of surface learning is a 'deep learning' approach (Marton & Saljo, 1997), which occurs when the student attempts to examine and explore the initial task or learning opportunity, followed by attempts to understand the meaning of the task, the conclusions that can be drawn, the implications for practice, and by taking a critical and questioning approach (Biggs, 2003). Therefore the introduction of the Ws and CSEs, Reflective Evaluations and practice seminars were a means to develop a deep learning approach and this was achieved by most.

The constant focus on theory proved to be an effective strategy for students as they gradually began to develop a sense of ownership of the task, where they were observed to increasingly integrate theory and practice. Students developed an understanding of the complexity of the work that they were undertaking and the importance of their professional intervention in relation to the lives of the vulnerable in the community. They developed an awareness of the role of the professional social worker and at times could contrast this with the more simplistic definition enshrined within agency role and responsibilities. It also gave permission for students to explore and evaluate the implication of social work values in relation to some of the work cultures and practices

within work settings and across professional boundaries.

The holistic and comprehensive nature of the WSs and CSEs, with emphasis on analysis and critical evaluation, provided the vehicle for students to develop and hone their skills, from the planning of the assessment to the collection of the data, to the sifting through weighing up processes (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002; Parker & Bradley, 2007), in order to arrive at an overall analysis of the service users' needs and objectives for intervention. It also forced them to develop clarity about the link between assessment and the intervention.

The linking of the pieces of work to academic as well as professional scrutiny was important. This emphasised in the students' minds the crucial role of reflection in both the academic and the practice domains. Where this was not happening in placement, students reported the need to be proactive in ensuring that the skills of applying theory to practice became a constant feature of their supervision agenda.

Conclusion

Social Work is practised today in a context which has become very complex with its multiplicity of concerns, demands and agency constraints. Increasingly high criteria for access to services have placed higher skills demands upon practitioners. It is, therefore, not surprising that students often express concerns about how they will be able to manage these demands and constraints while maintaining the quality of their practice following qualifying. Newly qualified practitioners therefore have to develop knowledge in training that will support them positively with the many challenging encounters that they face in their day-to-day practice.

The skill of critical reflection is crucial for qualifying social workers in managing these demands and constraints. Therefore, this skill has to be developed and cemented during training and once developed, it will be the key to continued professional development after qualifying (Knott & Scragg, 2007). Social work will always confront the practitioner with new and unique situations. Hamer (2006, p. 12) comments, 'The social work process is a creative flow. We have a menu of tools and resources at our disposal but how we use them and fit them together is entirely up to us'. The value of a thoroughly explored range of theories

and interventions empowers the newly qualified social worker to respond professionally and creatively to a range of complex situations. Parker (2004, p 27) argues that 'reflection seeks to transform the way we approach matters and to use knowledge exploration to learn and develop'. Social work is inevitably defined by the social contexts in which it is practised and therefore requires practitioners who are able to respond to these ever changing social contexts with knowledge, skills and professional integrity.

The National Occupational Standards set out important tasks that social workers should achieve in order to qualify (as did the Core Competences before them). These are useful as a clear set of expectations but they are descriptive outcomes of what social workers do at the point in time that they are formulated. They are not an indication of the complexity of work or level of functioning that a worker should achieve at the point of qualifying. We believe that the current methods of assessing students' practice by collecting evidence for the National Occupational Standards has inherent problems of fragmentation and does not facilitate the theoretical, analytic and reflective skills needed for the work. It is our belief that some of the criticisms of the quality of qualifying education and training of both the DipSW and the degree are due to this process of fragmentation.

We offer an example of a process that we believe achieves professional development in a much more cohesive and relevant way and was significant in helping students develop much better analytical and reflective skills than had happened with the competence framework and is happening with the National Occupational Standards currently. We also believe this process enables educators to be more confident about their assessment of students' ability to practice at an appropriate standard and safely and to make that recommendation.

Notes

1. The education regulator now replaced in the UK by the Care Councils
2. Thanks go to the University of Huddersfield who operated a type of cross referencing for the DipSW upon which the idea was built.

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