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A Model of Social Work Education: Providing Professional Training for Practitioners in Full-time Employment.

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Abstract:

This article provides an evaluation and analysis of a professional social work course for experienced practitioners from the point of view of the course team and the participants at the Department of Applied Social Studies, University College, Cork. Although the initiative described is a unique one the issues examined may be relevant to wider social work training. Central themes of discussion include principles of adult education, attempts to bridge the theory practice divide, the use of group work and portfolio as learning contexts. An independent model of practice teaching is also examined. The experience suggests that the development of a collaborative approach in education provides an enriching environment where the wealth of knowledge and experience of participants can be utilised in the teaching process.

Key Words: Social work training, education, professionalisation, portfolio learning.

Introduction

Within contemporary social work education there has been a proliferation of literature on the development of training for experienced practitioners, and the relevance of adult education principles is well established (Coulshed, 1993, Taylor, 1998, Memmott and Brennan, 1998). The central purpose of this paper is to explore a method of social work education based on these principles, which promotes the

acquisition of theory, enhances the development of skills and nurtures the practice wisdom of participants. The tension between agency practice and educational standards is a focal point of the discussion. The recognition and negotiation of this dissonance is a key to the creation of a positive learning environment.

Social work in Ireland has its own unique history and in the main developed in the 1970's with a rapid expansion in social and health services. During this period many people were employed as social workers with a Bachelors Degree in Social Science; this was not recognised as a professional qualification. In the mid nineties a group of practising social workers who held this qualification obtained prior to 1985 found that when they applied for new social work positions or promotions, they were being turned down due to the lack of professional or academic qualifications. All had several years of experience working in social work, some with up to three decades in the field. The workers organised themselves and approached their union. They requested to be 'grand-fathered in'¹ and to have their experience as social workers validated. The National Social Work Qualification Board (NSWQB), a statutory body established in 1997 turned down this request. Subsequently, in negotiation with the union, the NSWQB, University College Cork and the prospective participants, a Higher Diploma in Social Science was offered as a professional training course. This paper provides an account of the experiences and reflections of the staff and participants during three intakes of this course.

Adult Education

When experienced social work practitioners re-enter the University setting after many years in practice, they present social work educators with a unique challenge. They bring with them a set of strengths, vulnerabilities and the wisdom of their professional life experience often moulded by the harsh realities of current social work practice and policies. From an adult learning perspective, the work experience and prior training adult learners bring into the educational environment serve as a rich resource for learners and facilitators alike. (Memmott and Brennan, 1998). The course team were sensitive to these elements when planning the Higher Diploma in Social Science programme. It was considered vital that practice wisdom was embedded in the learning process. As a result, the context, content and processes were designed to help participants develop a stronger sense of their professional identity by building further social work theory and practice skills on their already rich knowledge base.

According to Memmott and Brennan (1998) the environment of social work education has not yet been precisely and accurately defined. Our endeavour was to provide a learning environment, which gave the course participants and facilitators

¹ This is a colloquial term that refers to the notion of a person being granted professional recognition based on their years of social work employment

the opportunity to reflect, to give voice to and to have dialogue around issues of practice and the theoretical frameworks that inform it. This generated discussion about the difficulties in finding precise definitions based on their work. The focus was on linking their practice knowledge with current academic debates regarding the role and identity of social work. It was also an opportunity to delve into the larger, constantly shifting social issues that provide the current context for their day-to-day practice in their agency settings.

This struggle to find congruence between the daily tasks of social work practice, and the academic rhetoric and analysis required by the course became the cornerstone for further knowledge building and progress. Finding the relevant theoretical frameworks that adequately informed and developed participants' understanding of their practice was demanding of the individual and required of staff an open, trusting and supportive approach. Encouragement and validation were instrumental in the motivating process.

In any group of learners, there are different needs, styles of learning, levels of motivation and resistance to the endeavour. Balancing participants' needs with the requirements of the university challenged the creativity of the course facilitators. Moving as they were from the 'management subculture' of the agency to the 'academic subculture' of the university required them to develop a 'bilingual capacity' over the year, which bridged both subcultures (Eraut, 1998, and Thackwray, 1997). From the beginning the course participants articulated the discontinuities between the agency with its emphasis on skill and productivity and the university with its emphasis on theory and applied knowledge. A distinction has been identified between 'technical knowledge', which is valued by the university, and 'practical knowledge' which is expressed through skill in practice and is valued by the agency. 'Technical knowledge is capable of written codification: but practical knowledge is expressed only in practice and learned only through experience with practice.' (Eraut, 1994: 42) Early in the course the application of theoretical frameworks to their practice created a hurdle for the participants. According to Eraut much of the knowledge possessed by the experienced professional is implicit, involving 'seeing from within the action' rather than from outside it, and he claims that 'they may have some difficulty in articulating a distinctive knowledge base'. (Eraut, 1994: 31)

While years of experience may or may not denote expertise, the course participants had developed their own practice strategies, and practice wisdom, which they were now required to reflect upon, understand and articulate. This 'personalised knowledge' is, 'knowledge which is known to the individual...or knowledge which is passed round primarily by word of mouth, becoming accepted canons of practice amongst those party to this knowledge' (Sheppard, 1995: 283). The group members

engaged in critiquing theory in its application to practice, thus enriching the learning experience. The course team took a collaborative approach to the learning endeavour in order to create an environment, which allowed participants to explore these dilemmas. The ethos of collaborative learning considers the student to be an active participant in the learning process and respects prior learning and life experience. It takes into consideration the fact that students themselves are teachers and resourcers of knowledge. Being open to adapting course delivery and assessment procedures, which would be based on participants' input and needs became fundamental to the process.

Course Outline

The course was funded by the Department of Health and Children and was set up for three intakes of approximately thirty participants each². It was estimated that there were approximately 120 social workers employed in Ireland with B.Soc.Sc. Degrees. The course was full-time, employment-based and participants were from all parts of Ireland from a range of social work agencies engaged in disparate activities including child welfare, local authority social work, working with people with disabilities, community work and the probation and welfare service. The aims of the course were twofold. Firstly, to increase knowledge and skills and secondly, to ensure that participants' practice was being delivered at a professional level. The participant profile was influential in the design and the delivery of the course. The age span of the group was between 35 years and 63 years of age with a range of practice experience from 8 years to 30 years. The gender breakdown of participants reflects that of the profession at large, with 77 women and 8 men attending. As well as being employed full time, many were rearing children, caring for elderly relatives and in some instances dealing with personal problems, including illness or marital difficulties.

This course was designed as a combination of taught modules, tutorial groups and assessed supervised practice. The taught modules took place over six separate weeks during the academic year. The six weeks of lectures covered a wide range of subject areas pertinent to the practice of social work such as Social Work Theory in an Irish and European Context; Contemporary Legal Issues and Justice; Social Policy; Child Care; Health Issues; and a series of social work practice seminars on topics decided by the participants. These lectures were given in various geographical locations, negotiated with the participants. Practice supervision and tutorial groups were conducted in the participants' work places and other locations convenient to them. This required the supervisor and tutors to travel extensively. The facilitation of learning for thirty participants at a distance proved to be a highly labour intensive process. Participants completed several pieces of written academic work to evidence the theoretical perspectives underpinning their practice and their learning during the

² Based on demand a fourth and final intake of the course has now been sanctioned.

year. They chose case material, which enabled them to critically reflect on their social work activity. These pieces of work were then formally presented to the college in a professional development portfolio. This will be considered in more detail later.

Course Delivery

Orientation /Induction

To enable adult learners to adjust to the university setting, educators must pay attention to the transition to the learning context (Taylor, 1998). The college year began with two days set aside for orientation to the course culture. These days were used as an opportunity for participants to meet each other and the staff; to orient themselves to the college facilities; to become au fait with the requirements and expectations of the university and to begin to engage in the learning process. In the second year a further day was added three months in advance of the starting date. This was significant as it gave the participants the time and space to consider the heavy demands that would be involved over the year and to make some of the necessary adjustments in their home and work schedules so that they were more organised when commencing their studies. Coulshed says of the induction period that, 'this phase is possibly the most significant, though overlooked, one in qualifying programs.' She sees this period as 'the engagement phase', which gives the learners an opportunity to know where they are going from the outset, to get a look at the 'big picture' and in a sense to 'deconstruct the programme' as they enter into it. (Coulshed, 1993: 10).

From the beginning, resistance was very high within the group and people were articulate in vocalising their strong misgivings about having to participate in the course in the first place. They seemed motivated by a conviction that they had not been taken seriously in their request to be seen as competent professionals, despite years of experience and they were insisting on fairness and due process. In this way the group developed a clear statement of its own identity in the learning environment. This presented the course team with the ongoing task of balancing students' needs and the university agenda. Following social work practice principles based on anti-discriminatory practice and empowerment, the team went with the resistance, with due respect for the struggles, rights responsibilities and needs of the group. In this manner, the collaborative environment was further developed.

Course requirements and assessment methods were largely received with a mixture of dread and resignation. These fears had not receded by the time the orientation days were over, but the participants had an opportunity to articulate their resistance and anxiety about their entry into the university culture. Through this process they established a sense of solidarity with each other, clarified expectations and gained familiarity with the university staff and the milieu.

The Academic Environment

An important aspect of this period was reorienting participants to the rigours of academic thinking, research and writing. It cannot be assumed that participants who have not been in the university for many years have proficiency with the specialised language, reflection, critical thinking, and organisation of material that is required. To do so is to engage in a kind of cultural myopia, which assumes that there is a dominant culture and its rules apply to all domains. Participants on this course came from an agency culture, which required them to write and think in a very different format. These differences were discussed and deconstructed during tutorial groups. The struggle with academic writing, critical thinking and accessing relevant up-to-date material continued for some participants throughout the year.

Practice Teaching

The role of the practice teacher was a central integrating feature of the course. This had the dual purpose of promoting professional learning and developing and validating current and prior practice. The model of practice teaching used was different from the traditional model of a supervisor employed by the agency. In this case an independent practice teacher was employed by the University and had responsibility for the assessment, co-ordination and facilitation of the participants' learning. Each person was seen individually to set up a practice-learning plan, which identified strengths and opportunities for knowledge building, skills and professional development. Participants were asked to select current cases from their workload, which they believed would match their learning needs. These cases then provided the material for critique and analysis.

Supervision sessions took place in small groups to which participants brought cases for exploration and discussion. Individual meetings were organised as required by the practice teacher or when requested by the participants. These sessions encouraged participants to identify, reflect on and appraise their practice knowledge and skills base. Providing a collaborative, learner-centred milieu created opportunities for the participants on this course to step back from their daily practice, to examine, critique and evaluate their well-worn methods, and to develop theoretical and ethical footholds for practice. They were aware that developing a clear, open working relationship with the practice teacher and the course team by the formation of the practice plan was a key aspect to their successful completion of the course. This relationship included an opportunity for participants to provide feedback on the practice teaching model itself thus promoting an anti-oppressive model of supervision (Karban, 1999). Facilitating participants to take some control of their learning needs encouraged their individual style and approach to practice.

The huge geographical distance between the participants and the practice teacher proved to be the greatest challenge for practice teaching. This was overcome by

establishing learning sites in key locations for small group sessions and being in regular telephone and e-mail contact. The result of this approach was that it tended to focus on content and method to the detriment of the dynamics of the relationship between participant and practice teacher. On the other hand the age and experience of the particular participants on this course proved to be a distinct advantage for the use of this model. A small study on long-arm supervision highlights that decreased availability and contact between practice teacher and student can lead to greater autonomy. Depending on levels of confidence, ability and support from practice teacher and colleagues some of the participants gain positively from the experience of resolving issues independently (Karban, 1999). The model in the situation of the Higher Diploma in Social Science had the added advantage of honouring and respecting the professional status participants had acquired in their work places over the years.

One of the limitations of this model is that practice could not be observed in all cases by the practice teacher. This was overcome by including a course requirement that participants negotiate direct supervision by a social worker on some of their cases. This proved to be a particularly enriching and affirming experience whereby the observations of respected colleagues were listened to, taken seriously and acted on. A professional development portfolio was used as a self-directed learning and assessment tool. A variety of teaching and assessment methods were used including work on self reflection, case presentations and discussion, process recordings, learning incidents, practice interviews on video and tape, and group presentation. These provided a flexible means of identifying and addressing concerns regarding participant's practice. These issues were discussed confidentially with the individual and addressed as they arose.

Groupwork in the Education Process

Groups have long been recognised as a major forum for learning. 'Groupwork offers a way to overcome the theory-practice dissonance which has contributed to the maintenance of the 'culture gap' between the academic and practice areas of social work. In this way, groupwork provides a synthesis to promote transformative analysis.' (Lordan and Wilson, 2000). The education process on the course was guided by Stone's principles of classroom empowerment, respect, validation, ownership and choice. (Stone, 1995) At all levels of the course, participants were facilitated to communicate and interact in a supportive but challenging environment. This was achieved through continual negotiation and dialogue. Participants were invited to share their professional perspectives and their practice dilemmas in large group discussions, small group tutorials and supervisory sessions. The most intensive groupwork took place in small tutorial and supervision sessions of three to five people that provided a safe environment for case discussions, to enable students to critically reflect on their work.

The explicit recognition of the participants' practice wisdom facilitated the creation of a trusting environment. Here they could safely provide feedback and challenge each other, be challenged by the course team and more importantly feel free to reciprocate with their own reflections on and interpretation of the course material. The discussion and agreement of basic learning principles that included, respect for each persons input, confidentiality and a non competitive environment from the beginning, helped to generate an atmosphere of openness with an emphasis on the expression of difference both of ideas and work practices. The exploration of personal and professional values and ethical dilemmas required sensitive facilitation of the ability to be with difference and to promote anti-discriminatory practice. Participants readily shared their knowledge, resources and relevant material with each other, which again promoted collaborative learning.

During the supervision groups the participants and practice teacher engaged in a process that Schon calls 'reflective conversation with a unique and uncertain situations' (Schon, 1995:130). Each participant brought a case for discussion whereby they posed questions about their practice and the presentation was responded to by 'surfacing and criticising the students framing of the problem. He does this implicitly, leaving his criticism of the old problem to be inferred from his way of restructuring it' (Schon, 1995: 130). During the discussions solutions were not sought to the case but new ways of looking at the work evolved.

Another function of group work was the opportunity to further develop their social work skills and critically reflect on their application. The demonstration of participant's particular expertise, through presentations, role-plays and simulations provided a structure to develop and enhance skills. Opportunities to try new approaches, take risks and break the mould became surprisingly possible as participants' confidence grew and they began to recognise and realise their own potential. This method of sharing and learning was crucial to the selection and development of the artefacts for their professional portfolio.

Portfolio Learning

According to Freidus 'portfolios are seen as bridges connecting personal knowledge, academic knowledge and knowledge of the field' (Freidus 1998: 54.) A working definition of a portfolio as is 'the structured documentary history of a set of coached or mentored acts of teaching, substantiated by samples of student portfolios and fully realised only through reflective writing, deliberation and conversation.' (Schulman, 1998: 37).

The portfolio process served to allow these mature professionals to bring their practice narratives into the learning environment. It provided the participants with a number

of opportunities. Firstly, to reflect on what motivated them become social workers, what sustains them in practice and what informs their work. This was achieved by means of a self-reflection written assignment. Secondly, to deconstruct critical incidents in their work with service users and through the in-depth assessment of their own cases to build up a concrete knowledge, skill and value base which developed over the year. This again took the form of written assignments. And thirdly, to demonstrate and consolidate their expertise by making a formal presentation to the larger group. Participants were encouraged to use creative means to depict their social work practice. This they achieved through poster presentations, art, role-play, music and dialogue.

The portfolio process provided a learning continuum, which allowed participants to track their own professional development throughout the year. Many felt deskilled by the middle of the course and doubted the givens in their practice. Eraut (1994) claims that 'The problems of introducing new knowledge are greater in contexts of normal professional practice, where work is likely to involve behavioural routines which are difficult to deconstruct and reassemble without causing disorientation and the threat of a temporary (and the fear of a more than temporary) inability to cope' (Eraut, 1994: 26). Since all learning is marked by disequilibrium as new more complex schemas replace the old, it is important for educators to keep this in mind, when mentoring and supervising the process. This is particularly true for mature practitioners who are re-entering the educational process, as was borne out by the course experience.

At the heart of portfolio development is the participants' reflection on their own practice. Post-modern feminist theorists provide a good analysis of the complexity of this task. In particular Fook (2000) researching professional expertise by comparing experienced and inexperienced practitioners concludes that expertise is not located in situations where theory is related to practice but rather when practitioners develop theory and knowledge from their practice experience and apply this new theory to relevant contexts. The ability to generate new knowledge to new contexts and the creation of new meaning is recognised as a skill in its own right. Fook referring to Eraut recognises this as skills of transferability as opposed to generalised theory deduction. Therefore skills of reflexivity and critical reflexivity are central as 'it is this theory which can be articulated and better developed through a reflexive process. Professional expertise therefore involves the ability to reflect upon and develop theory from practice' (Fook, 2000: 116). This approach was harnessed as a means of enhancing participants' reflective abilities. The first written assignment promoted this by asking them to reflect and critically evaluate their current practice and professional development. This exercise while challenging enabled participants to identify and to articulate the theories, values and skills that inform their practice and reflect on the context and political influences within which they function.

Eraut suggests that mid-career professionals, such as the participants on this course, are best served in the learning environment if they are given the opportunity to 'reflect on their experience, make it more explicit through having to share it, interpret it and recognise it as a basis for future learning.' (Eraut 1994: 57). Not all students found it easy to engage with the notion of reflection and particularly during the initial stages it became obvious that working on the portfolio was an intensely personal experience for many, raising contradictions in their own attitudes and belief system. As one participant said that 'though I've been working in my agency for 15 years, I don't trust that what I'm doing is the right thing anymore, and there is no support where I work for not knowing what you're doing'. To be asked to reflect on themselves and discover their *raison d'être* of practice within theoretical and ethical frameworks was a new experience for many and was familiar territory for others. As one person pointed out 'we don't have time to reflect on the job, we have to be results-oriented and nobody cares how we think or feel about it'.

Reflection on practice was therefore an opportunity for course participants to learn more; to wonder, pose questions, develop new hypothesis and to achieve new understandings and meanings. An outcome of the process was the recognition of the common ground of social work in the midst of the diversity of social work domains. Participants became very self-aware of their motivation and contribution to practice. Their shared commitment towards the provision of welfare services, social justice and social change was evident. Participant's evaluations towards the end of this article illustrate these claims.

The use of the portfolio requires the student to question previous ways of thinking and acting, reframing the image of self and other. Freidus argues that it is counter to traditional way of acquiring knowledge. Instead 'change... emerges over time through a process of construction, a process both experiential and dialogical, that is transformative' (Freidus, 1998: 51). In order to embrace fully the philosophy and process of professional portfolio development, the structure and scaffolding which supports the participant in their reflexivity and which promotes reflexivity throughout the learning milieu in the university needs to be negotiated and formalised. This was achieved through the creation of small tutorials and practice groups held over the course of the year and discussed earlier.

One aspect of the portfolio that raised dilemmas for the course team was the assessment requirement. While it is possible to distinguish good practice from more incompetent levels of practice the actual grading of practice assignments was in part a subjective endeavour. On the other hand, participants reported that the requirement of assessment greatly facilitated their learning. They felt that the academic demand provided an impetus in motivating and stimulating them to produce the work of.

a high standard. Recognising the different learning needs of participants within the group, small group presentations of practice, which encouraged creative means of expression were introduced after the first year. This proved significant in terms of participants learning from one another and in demonstrating the high levels of creativity within the group.

The mentoring and supervising of the portfolio was also a learning process for the course team. It proved to be time-consuming and intensive and required sensitivity, creativity and flexibility in the giving of constant and timely feedback. The team were required to be critically reflexive and to invite feedback and assessment from the participants on the ongoing processes and practices of the course.

A challenge to promoting reflective activity was the tendency to focus excessively on the individual problem and its resolution, neglecting the more public and political dimensions of practice. Participants were encouraged to face the latter aspects of their work as a means of opening the way to a more radical consciousness of the existence of power in social work practice. This is recognised as a key ingredient of the reflective process whereby 'they also hold a commitment to challenging power relations and arrangements'. (Fook, 2000: 117).

Overall this group appeared to have a natural ability to engage in this process and to handle the complexities of daily social work practice in a manner that could not be expected of more inexperienced students. This may be a reflection of the advanced level of their social work experience. Once participants learned to be critically reflective they began to gain in strength and confidence in their ability to analyse and evaluate the impact and effect of their interventions. In this way participants were able to create new meanings of situations, and seek innovative practice solutions maintaining their commitment to a system of social work principles and values.

Evaluation

Overall, participants' feedback and evaluation of the course was very positive. There were however some aspects of the course observed by the course team, which were not facilitative of the learning process. The most important of these was the difficulty most participants encountered in trying to access material. Although special arrangements were made for extended book borrowing with the college library and reading facilities sought in other university libraries throughout the country, participants were greatly concerned by their lack of easy access to relevant literature. While recognising its limitations a course reader would have been an asset in this regard. A distance-learning programme needs to be supported by the availability of core books and flexible arrangements for borrowing.

Another factor, which impacted negatively on many of the participants, was the inconsistency of financial and agency support. Even when full financial support was present, workloads remained the same putting severe pressure on those involved. The negotiation of this pressure created new learning, as participants were forced to prioritise between work, home and the course. Interestingly the participants reported back at the end of the course, that the time they secured for their own development was an unforeseen bonus and something that they began to cherish.

In the first year in an effort to be facilitative of participants' needs, and the distances they have to travel, the course team negotiated with the group different venues for all teaching weeks. This proved to be a cumbersome and a conflictual exercise for all of those involved. This approach did not take into account the pedagogical needs, based on course requirements and timing, for example it was more important to have library access at certain times in the course than others. In the second and subsequent years although some possibility for negotiation was maintained, the course team decided venue for certain weeks in advance. Participants were then asked to commit themselves to this cycle of the course in full knowledge of the travelling requirements.

Despite these shortcomings the course was a success, participants reporting increased levels of professional confidence, knowledge, skills and self-awareness. The course team's observations corroborate with this as did the comments of the external examiner regarding the high standards overall. It was through the validation of their practice and the acquisition of theoretical frameworks to support it, that participants were able to examine their practice anew. They came to appreciate the opportunity for professional development that the course provided.

All of the participants reported a growth in confidence at the end of the course with 90% reporting a very significant increase. These improved levels of confidence are in stark contrast to the feelings of demoralisation and burnout expressed by participants in the early stages of the course. In the words of the participants themselves,

"I feel affirmed in my practice and more confident and knowledgeable."

"I find that this has been the greatest benefit. I had to delve very deeply into my field of work for good theoretical material and now find that I am noticeably more knowledgeable than team colleagues in a particular field, as all my information is absolutely fresh".

"I am more confident about what I'm doing and more willing to challenge agency decisions which disempower the staff. I am much more aware of the clients' right to make informed choices and to empower them as far as possible."

While there was a demand by some for increased skills teaching, self-evaluations reflected an enhancement and development of professional skill for example,

"I am more proud of my profession and more focused, creative, respectful and sensitive to my clients. My skills and theoretical knowledge have improved."

"Anti-discriminatory thinking has really changed my focus and this will benefit my clients."

"My observation skills and the acts of preplanning and evaluation are tasks I now do without realising they have become second nature."

A significant experience for many of the participants on the course was the recognition and the greater awareness of the importance of the use of self in practice. As portrayed by the following comments,

"I am more focused and tune in to where I am emotionally. I am more confident in my awareness and beliefs and far surer of what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. I am excited about this new awareness and confidence --- I can't believe it!"

"I can stand back more and reflect on my actual practice...I have tuned in more to the needs of my client from a more positive perspective"

"I feel open to change and have in a sense stepped outside myself to look at myself in practice."

Participants also noted a surprising element of personal growth through being able to meet the challenges presented by course requirements, which they found to be '*reenergising*', '*regenerating*' and '*revitalising*'. The recognition of their valuable contribution to social work, over many years, also strengthened their professional identity.

Conclusion

The Higher Diploma in Social Science evolved from a particularly complex set of circumstances whereby experienced social workers were regarded as being no longer fully qualified for their posts. Nevertheless, a number of worthwhile learning points emerged from this initiative, which in effect became an advanced education programme. These may have relevance and application to other social work training, which seeks to bridge the theory practice divide.

Firstly, recognition by the course team of the practice wisdom of the practitioners was crucial to the overall success. This approach to course delivery whereby the participants' social work practice became an embedded aspect of the educational environment appeared to enrich their learning experience promoting the development of their social work identity. To achieve this required that the staff team recognise they were not the source of wisdom that this springs from the process of dialogue. Providing a practice centred knowledge thus necessitates a change for lecturers from their normal role and method of information delivery, where they are creators and transmitters of generalised knowledge, to that of enhancing the knowledge creation capacities of participants.

Secondly, the development of a model of practice teaching that was independent from the agencies served to objectify the learning process, and give external professional validation. This model facilitated anti-oppressive practice by avoiding the establishment of a power dynamic in the teaching relationship. A limitation of this approach was the focus on content and method as opposed to a more open and flexible learning relationship that would enable a continual dialogue between the participant and the practice teacher.

Finally, the recognition of the tension between the heavy demands of practice and the accomplishment of the intense educational requirement; was crucial to the learning process. Firm and sensitive discussion regarding educational standards, which included addressing participants' anxieties and fears of academic work, and the focus on participants' social work practice strengths, encouraged their progress. The achievements gained through the accomplishment of this task generated professional growth and personal satisfaction on completion of the course. The realisation of a theoretical base for their practice increased their understanding of their professional power and responsibility. This was reflected in the evaluation completed by the participants who reported increased confidence, enhanced professional skill and self-awareness.

The collaborative approach demonstrated on this course was viewed by all involved as being particularly successful with advanced and at times resistant practitioners. The shared learning for both staff and participants highlights some of the key elements required for social work education that seeks to utilise the creativity and practice wisdom of all group members.

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