Skills Development and Theorising Practice in Social Work Education

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Report 3

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SWAP funded projects 2005-2006

In 2005 SWAP funded eight projects in social policy and social work education designed to promote the use of effective learning, teaching and assessment activities; to encourage the development and sharing of innovative approaches and to raise awareness of the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of educational methods. The following is the final report of the project *Skills Development and Theorising Practice in Social Work Education.*

Introduction

This project aims to inform the development of future best practice in teaching and learning in social work education in the areas of theory-practice integration and communication skills. The researchers conducted a theoretically informed, evidence-based investigation of a particular course unit entitled *Skills Development and Theorising Practice,* which ran in 2002-2003. This unit aimed to address both the teaching and learning of listening/communication skills and the relationship between social work theory and practice. Analysis of this unit enhances our understanding of how student development can be facilitated in these key areas of practice. The principles arising out of a theoretically informed and evidence-based micro-analysis of the relevant data are applicable across a range of teaching and learning situations, including other health, social care and education professions.

The policy and research context

In order to contextualise the project, it is useful to make some comments about current concerns in both social work policy and social work education research.

Social work policy

The expectation that social work students will be enabled to integrate theory and practice as well as develop good communication skills is a prominent feature of the new social work degree as illustrated in the three policy documents that frame it: the *Quality Assurance Agency Benchmarking Statement* (2000), the *National Occupational Standards for Social Work* (2002) and the Department of Health *Requirements for Social Work Training* (2002). The Benchmarking Statement sets out what is required of students in order to be awarded an academic degree. The *National Occupational Standards for Social Work* detail what employers require that social workers are able to do when entering employment. The Department of Health requirements summarise the government's expectations about the admission of students to social work degree programmes and about provision for their teaching, learning and assessment. These three documents form the basis for assessment at the end of a social work degree programme in higher education.

All three documents emphasise the importance of theory-practice connections. The *Quality Assurance Agency Benchmarking Statement* emphasises the importance of students being able to make connections between critical disciplinary knowledge from the social and human sciences, relevant legislation, and practice. It recognises that the connections and processes are complex and iterative and must take place within a principled, ethical framework. The *National Occupational Standards for Social Work*, although more practically oriented, emphasise the importance of social workers having relevant knowledge and being able to "understand, critically analyse, evaluate and apply" various aspects of legal, social, and economic knowledge and theory. Social workers

must have knowledge of psychological and sociological explanations and operate within an ethical framework (*TOPSS UK*, 2002, p.20). The Department of Health requirements state that "All providers must: …ensure that the teaching of theoretical knowledge, skills and values is based on their application in practice" (DoH 2002, p.3). Social workers must have knowledge of law (pp.3-4).

All three documents also emphasise the importance of communication skills. The Department of Health requires that all social workers must be trained in "communication skills with children, adults and those with particular communication needs" (DoH 2002, pp.3-4) and that "all social workers will learn and be assessed on…communication skills" (DoH 2002, p.8). The Benchmarking statement talks of both written and oral communication skills. It states that social workers should be able to "listen actively to others, engage appropriately with the life experiences of service users, understand accurately their viewpoint and overcome personal prejudices to respond appropriately to a range of complex personal and interpersonal situations" (p.14). The *National Occupational Standards for Social Work* emphasise that social workers must "listen actively to what individuals, families, carers, groups and communities have to say" and "talk to those requiring and using services, and their carers with due respect for their age, ethnicity, culture, understanding and needs" (p2).

The social work education research literature

A recent review of the literature on the teaching and learning of communication skills in social work education (Trevithick et al 2004) raised a number of concerns about available research in the area. Some of the major concerns related to:

• the underlying theoretical coherence of the evaluative approaches used by researchers

• the underlying theoretical coherence of the teaching/learning approaches used by those teaching the courses

• the difficulty of finding appropriate outcome measures for such courses including measures of transferability to practice, their long-term effects on both social work practice and service users.

In this project, we cannot hope to address all these major concerns, but we hope to make useful contributions to the first and second.

Purposes of the current research

Theoretical context and contribution

In 2002-2004, a group of researchers (Rosamond Mitchell, Peter Ford, Brenda Johnston, Florence Myles and Christopher Brumfit) undertook a major research project, *The Development of Criticality among Undergraduates in Two Disciplines: Social Work and Modern Languages* (Economic and Social Research Council Project). This project investigated the development of criticality in undergraduates in Social Work and Modern Languages, proposing a theoretical framework for conceptualising criticality and its development and undertaking extensive data analysis. The current project has analysed for the first time a rich subset of data from the original criticality project, relating to one course unit at the University of Westford: *Skills development and theorising practice.*

The current project evaluates the unit as regards the teaching and learning of

• the integration of theory and practice

• communication skills, especially those of listening.

It does this within a principled theoretical framework, that of criticality development (critical action, critical self-reflection, critical thinking) (Mitchell et al 2004; Barnett 1997). Working within this broad framework, it focuses on the micro-analysis of developmental processes in classroom interactions, as well as the linkages between these processes and course outcomes and proposed skill development as specified in the course documentation. The study illuminates the contributions and limitations of such a unit to student critical development within the context of current social work education and policy concerns (e.g. Trevithick et al 2004; QAA 2000; TOPSS 2002), and thereby offers to social work educators, as well as those working in other applied fields, new understandings of the complex processes by which social work students develop interpersonal skills alongside their ability to theorise practice.

Research questions

In relationship to the teaching/learning of the integration of theory and practice and effective communication skills, especially listening, we ask:

• How can we understand and evaluate the teaching/learning in this unit in the light of theoretical understandings of criticality?

• What light does micro-analysis of classroom interactions shed on critical development processes? What are the processes taking place? How do they operate?

• How do the interactions in the classroom relate to desired course outcomes as specified in course documentation and key skill development? How does this relate to criticality development?

• How do the theoretical understandings of criticality relate to current social work education concerns?

- How could the teaching/learning of listening skills and theorising practice be enhanced in the future, according to these theoretical understandings?

Description of the unit: "Skills development and theorising practice"

The unit observed was part of the old General Social Care Council's Diploma in Social Work. However, the findings of this study are relevant to current practice as they are based on underlying explanatory principles. In addition, preparation for the new degree had been ongoing for some time by the time the unit was observed so practice was closely aligned with expectations of the new social work degree.

The overall degree programmes

The undergraduate and masters social work degree programmes undertaken by students contributing to this research were similar to other programmes. In the final year, the 80-day placement was spread over six months, from October to March; in the first phase it ran for three days each week, after New Year it occupied four days per week, and in the final phase it was full-time. The interwoven study days were used for dissertation study, and there was also an academic programme which was designed to support learning in the practice placement. This programme included a series of Skills Workshops, using video feedback to support interpersonal skills exercises, a linked series of seminars whose aim was to foster reflective discussion of the integration of theoretical knowledge and practice, a series of informal group tutorials, and a lecture series on group work. In this research, it was the video workshops and theory and practice integration sessions that were observed, the two elements in the unit *Skills development and theorising practice.*

The unit "Skills development and theorising practice"

The unit *Skills development and theorising practice* ran for a total of seven weeks for three hours a week in one semester in 2002. One researcher in the current group, Brenda Johnston, observed two out of the three hours of sessions each week for the entire unit.

The group of students observed consisted of eight people, including several mature students. The unit sessions were described in the Unit Handbook as follows:

> *Students will work in groups of approximately eight students, and each group will be led by a member of staff. Each group will undertake two separate, but related, learning activities:*
>
> - *skills development workshops*
>
> - *theorising practice seminars*
>
> *The first will be run as eight consecutive two hour workshops, and the second as eight one hour learning groups. Student and staff membership of the groups*

for each of the two activities will stay the same. The programme will be essentially experiential and discussion based although it is expected students will read associated material identified in this booklet and during the course (Unit Handbook).

The aims of the video listening workshops were described as follows:

Broadly speaking, the aims of the sessions we will be facilitating are to:

• *Develop the participants' ability to listen attentively*

• *Demonstrate the importance of a speaker's awareness of the effect s/he is having on those listening*

• *Highlight the importance of the listener's role, and what effects s/he has on those who are talking. Illustrate the value of listening without judging*

• *Understand the impact of non verbal communication* (Unit Handbook, p.3)

A further description of the skills workshops followed:

Skills Workshops: Learning will be structured through:

• *Pairs of students, a 'talker' and a 'listener', engaging with each other in ways which aim to help the 'talker' develop understanding, insight or in other ways take forward some aspect of a current, real-life issue chosen by them. This will provide opportunity and material for the 'listener' to practice and receive feedback on the core skills identified*

• *The paired session will be observed by the rest of the learning group, and where possible videotaped*

• *The 'talker', staff member and other students will give feedback to the 'listener' on their behaviour in the session and its observed impact on the 'talker', using the videotape if available, or some other structured material*

• *The staff member will facilitate the learning group through modelling the behaviours being addressed, helping students conceptualise the relevant interactional process, and providing supportive but also, where appropriate, experientially challenging feedback*

• *Reading relevant research and theoretical material outside the workshops* (Unit Handbook, p.7).

.The theorising practice groups were described as follows:

> Student group members will be helped to develop an
> agenda of activity and discussion through which they can
> actively reflect upon the full range of their experience
> on the programme in ways which will contribute towards
> an integration, or synthesis, of the diverse personal,
> intellectual, behavioural and emotional dimensions of their
> professional development (Unit Handbook, p.5).

At the time it was observed, the unit was not formally assessed.

It is important to note that the various groups were timetabled at different times and the different groups and tutors organised the sessions somewhat differently.

Data analysis procedures

Available data

Available data consist of:

- either typed class notes of each session or full transcriptions of classroom interactions in sessions that were audio-recorded. In the case of the video workshop listening skills sessions it was not possible for reasons of confidentiality to audio-record the sessions

- the unit and degree programme documentation

- national policy documentation (e.g. Benchmarking statement, QAA 2000);

- an in-depth interview with the course tutor where one of the major topics discussed is the relevant unit

- in-depth interviews with three case study undergraduate students who were also taking this unit, although in a different group from the one observed. The students expressed views on their experience of this unit in the interviews, as well as a variety of other issues related to their degree programme in a series of interviews over the course of their final year. The three case study students have very different profiles from each other.

The case study students provide a selection of views from the unit, although we are not claiming that they constitute a representative sample of student views overall. The perspectives of the three case study students were especially interesting in that their groups each ran on slightly different lines from one another and from the observed group, according to the preferences of the tutors and students in the group and in that their comments are those made in confidence to a researcher. The groups of two of the case study students, Ian and Jayne, were organised more flexibly than the group observed in that the theorisation of practice discussions were less structured. The third case study student was in a group where it was decided in advance that different students would make presentations about issues of concern to them and would then lead a discussion of related issues. Our case study student led a session on confidentiality issues.

The data were typed up, largely before the present project began, as part of the major criticality project out of which the present project developed.

The data analysis process

We carried out an iterative, analytical process of moving backwards and forwards between theoretical concepts and our data. The theory helped us to see patterns in the data and close scrutiny of the data helped us to refine the theoretical framework we were developing.

We started with some initial theoretical ideas from the previous criticality project. These ideas provided a useful starting point, but were not fully developed at the start of the project.

One of the researchers, Brenda Johnston, looked initially at two transcripts, one from each element of the unit *Skills development and theorising practice*, in order to see what themes emerged from an initial scrutiny of

the data. At times, these themes emerged from the data without external prompting and at other times, they related to notions in the existing theoretical framework from the criticality project as described in the previous section of this report.

Johnston then read through national policy documentation (DoH 2002; QAA 2000; TOPSS UK 2002) to select the passages relevant to the current project. She also read through the recent literature review by Trevithick et al (2004) on the teaching and learning of communication skills in Social Work Education to pick out concerns about available knowledge, focusing especially on areas where we seemed able to make a useful contribution. She also read through a selection of the relevant educational literature on learning through interaction (e.g. Mercer 1995; Edwards and Westgate 1994; Wenger 1998).

At this point, Johnston read through all the sources of data, compiling a detailed narrative account of the unit sessions and picking out extracts from the interviews that were relevant to the current project, making notes about where she saw connections to the theoretical framework as well as noting some connections to unit/programme documentation and policy concerns.

Johnston then analysed each set of data moving iteratively between different sections of the theoretical framework and the data, noting relevant points, adding to the theoretical framework where the data analysis contributed to theoretical understandings, reflecting on the data in the light of existing theoretical understandings. She wrote an analytical account for each data source. This final report is a distillation of these analytical accounts. The final report and parts of the earlier analytical accounts have been commented on by other team members. In addition, the main findings were presented at a workshop for a varied audience of social work educators, social work practitioners and educationalists at the University of Southampton on May 9 2006. The researchers reflected on comments made and feedback from commentary received has been incorporated in, and shaped, the final report.

We would like to make some comments about the validity of the analytical process in this project. In all qualitative research the researcher plays, or should do, an acknowledged and integral part in the research outcomes in terms, firstly, of influencing the data by virtue of who s/he is and what s/he says and, secondly, of interpreting the data which is never a transparent, neutral, value-free process. (In quantitative research in educational settings the same is largely true, but less often acknowledged.)

> *In all forms of qualitative research, interpretations,*
> *judgements and decisions are made by the researcher*
> *through a process which Strauss and Corbin (1990, pp. 41-7)*
> *call "theoretical sensitivity"* (cited in Somekh 1995, p.348).

Given this fluid situation, the qualitative researcher has to develop rigorous procedures for validating his/her findings. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest a focus on both *internal* and *external* validity. *Internal* validity focuses on the internal credibility and plausibility of the research findings, and rigour and suitability of the research process. *External* validity focuses on the "transferability" and "fittingness" (ibid, p.279) of the research conclusions and processes. In qualitative research this transferability can

take place through theoretical connections or case-to-case transfer (ibid, p.279). (In traditional quantitative research generalisation and validation of findings would most typically occur through generalisation from sample to population, but this is usually not appropriate in qualitative research.)

In terms of *internal validity*, we have tried to follow a rigorous and suitable analytical research process as described above. The iterative data analysis procedures followed correspond to those of the "constant comparison" as explained by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In this approach to data analysis:

> *...each segment of data is taken in turn, and, its relevance to one or more categories having been noted, it is compared with other segments of data similarly categorised. In this way, the range and variation of any given category can be mapped in the data, and such patterns plotted in relation to other categories.*

> *As this process of systematic sifting and comparison develops, so the emerging model will be clarified* (cited in Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, p.180).

Hammersley and Atkinson then point out that:

> *The development of theory rarely takes the purely inductive form implied by Glaser and Strauss ...Theoretical ideas, common sense expectations, and stereotypes often play a key role. Indeed, it is these that allow the analyst to pick out surprising, interesting, and important features in the first place (ibid, p.180).*

And indeed this blend and interaction of analytical inputs is what happened in this project.

The aspect of testing out the framework corresponds to the process of analytical induction, described by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), whereby a rough understanding of a phenomenon is developed; the researcher hypothesises an explanation for the phenomenon and studies whether the explanation fits. If it does not, the hypothesis is reformulated, until the phenomenon is satisfactorily explained, and the hypothesised explanation tried against other cases. This procedure is continued until various cases have been tested. In this way, the hypothesised explanation keeps developing. In this approach:

> *the testing of theoretical ideas is not the end point of the process of scientific enquiry but is generally only one step leading to further development and refinement of the theory* (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, p.204).

In terms of *external validity*, we have tried to locate our research findings within existing, explanatory theoretical frameworks and within existing social work policy and research concerns. We have also tried to report our research findings in some detail so the researcher is enabled to make case-to-case transfers if appropriate.

Ultimately, the reader must judge how far we have succeeded in our aim of carrying out a useful, valid and rigorous piece of research.

Theoretical understandings of criticality

In this section of the report, we discuss our theoretical understandings. As discussed in the previous section of the report, these understandings arose out of an iterative data analysis process where the researchers moved backwards and forwards between data analysis and development of theoretical understandings, rather than starting with application of theory to data or alternatively building up theory completely from data analysis. This section of the report should be understood in that light. It is the final outcome (so far) of our theoretical development process.

The major theoretical background informing the research is that of criticality development. The development of criticality has long been a core aim of higher education, "a defining concept of the western university" (Barnett 1997, p.2). However, critical development has been poorly understood. The previous project on criticality proposed various significant theoretical elements which we have both drawn on and developed in the current project as follows.

This work on criticality provides macro theoretical tools to discuss the developmental levels and learning processes of students in the classes we are examining.

An understanding of the territory of criticality

We suggest, following the lead of Barnett (1997), that criticality can be understood over three domains:

a) critical thinking and formal knowledge

b) critical self-reflection

c) critical action and the world.

Barnett suggests that there is not a "determinate boundary" between the three domains, but that focusing attention on the three domains "highlight[s] the varying objects that critical thinking can take *and the purposes it can fulfil*" (ibid p.66). To take up a stance against the world, to evaluate a proposition and to attempt to understand oneself, there are three fundamentally different purposes of critical thinking (ibid p.66). He suggests that these three domains have to be brought together "if a unity of critical outlook is to be achieved" (ibid pp. 114-115).

Definition of criticality

We understand fully effective criticality in social science and humanities disciplines as:

• the motivation and ability to persuade, engage and act on the world and self through the operation of the mindful, analytical, evaluative, interpretive, reflective understanding of a body of relevant knowledge

- mediated by assimilated experience of how the social and physical environment is structured combined with a willingness and capacity to question and problematise our shared perceptions of relevance and experience.

This definition incorporates assumptions about the multi-domain nature of criticality, in Barnett's (1997) terms, as well as the centrality of knowledge, context, and dispositions and motivations in its practice. Lesser degrees of criticality, where individuals will have partial control over the elements described above, are possible and indeed we would expect many undergraduate students to be functioning with interim degrees of criticality.

Developmental aspects

We propose a developmental framework for criticality with three levels:

a) *Early criticality* where there is a tenuous engagement with and control over critical strategies and knowledge, largely within the terms of others' understandings and actions

b) *Mid criticality* where there is more secure control over critical strategies and knowledge and partial challenges at times to existing understandings and actions of others

c) *Late criticality* where there is mastery over critical strategies and knowledge and, where appropriate, the person can easily challenge orthodoxies within terms of his/her own understandings.

Level (a) in itself is an achievement. Level (c) corresponds to the fully effective criticality described in our definition. It is so advanced that we did not observe its operation among undergraduates in a sustained way during our fieldwork.

It is probably necessary that people work through the levels, learning to grasp basic concepts and principles before they can deconstruct and then reconstruct them. However, the speed at which this will happen is likely to vary considerably. It is not, moreover, inevitable that people will arrive at the capacity or motivation to deconstruct or reconstruct.

Each level of the developmental framework incorporates elements relating to:

a) the nature and degree of engagement with task

b) control over definition of topic, question and action

c) theory and data

d) the nature of information location and management

e) the nature and extent of links between the domains of formal knowledge, the self and the world

f) understanding of the nature of the territory, including power relationships and ability to function effectively at an interpersonal and political level within the territory

g) reflection, including self-reflection

h) construction and representation of a case, including both process and product.

Given that we are investigating a professional field in this project, a few words about the nature of professional development will be appropriate. Barnett (1997) presents a conceptualisation of critical professionalism which incorporates the different domains: formal knowledge, the self, and the world. We think that the conception of professionalism which Barnett offers is too advanced to be expected of an undergraduate student, but his conception is useful for considering (1) what the profession should be aiming for; (2) whether social work education is producing people with potential to reach this type of criticality.

The description of a fully-fledged professional as discussed by Barnett (1997) is as below. He argues that a professional should:

• be able to interpret world through theory

• be adept at handling those frameworks in action

• be able to understand the principles of different frameworks of action and to act within these

• be able to act within ethical codes and values

• have a right and a duty to speak out on public controversies relevant to the profession and their professional knowledge

• show loyalty to profession rather than wanton self-interest

• deploy professional knowledge throughout society, rather than just within the small sector of clients

• be able to engage with multiple and perhaps competing discourses (e.g. a patient as consumer of expensive services and a patient in need of attention)

• have personal qualities of fortitude, steadiness, and integrity (Barnett 1997, pp.132-144).

We might wish to add aspects of interprofessional activity, an area which has grown in significance in the last decade.

Contextual aspects

Any study of criticality has to conceptualise and examine the micro practice of individuals as they interact with their social and educational context. Sociologists have complex and overlapping conceptions of the relationship between structure and individual agency (see e.g. Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Drawing on these, we argue that any critical act will take place in a context which will consist of social, educational, disciplinary, emotional, ethical, physical environmental, cognitive and political elements which will themselves be in dynamic

interaction and which will be mediated and (re-)created by the choices of individuals.

Examples of relevant contextual factors in the current project are current social work education concerns – both technical and political; social work practice concerns; the nature of the discipline; group learning histories and personal biographic factors for the students.

Resources aspects

We suggest that students, or indeed others in society, need various resources to exercise criticality and that these resources will, in turn, be enhanced by their experiences as undergraduates or in other roles in life, both within the formal higher education setting and in their out-of-university settings. Functioning at each level of our developmental framework will require a higher level of *resources* than the previous level.

We suggest that the resources students need in order to become critical professionals centre around:

a) **different types of knowledge** which have fuzzy boundaries:

- declarative knowledge [of theories and research, the law, appropriate language] (Bakhtin 1986; Goodwin and Duranti 1992; Ryle 1949);

- procedural knowledge [including skills, knowledge of how relevant agencies and networks operate, how to use appropriate language] (Ryle 1949);

- knowledge of why it is useful, desirable to do something [e.g. listen empathetically] (Reimer 1998);

- knowledge of what it is to be [personal and professional experience] (Berlin 1980);

- ability to synthesise and make linkages between these various types of knowledge.

- knowledge of how language mediates the ongoing dialogue between an individual and his/her environment, the process of socialisation and the expression of individuality (Bakhtin 1986 pp.69, 80, 91-2). By virtue of its role describing reality, language also shapes reality and promotes learning as it is through the existing forms of language that individuals come to know their world, although they in turn can reshape reality by their use of language (Goodwin and Duranti 1992, p.17).

b) **certain personal and professional qualities and values** (including empathy and resilience, awareness of the values, ethical practices, priorities, modes of working and power structures implicit in a professional context and a capacity and willingness to be constructively critical of them).

c) **an appropriate teaching and learning environment**, broadly as well as narrowly conceived including

- explicit scaffolding and extensive practice of listening skills as well as linking between theory and practice within the classroom and in practice environments

- a constructive and supportive environment.

People will be able to exercise criticality, largely according to the intellectual, knowledge and personal resources available to them (Bailin et al 1999; McPeck 1990, p.20).

Disciplinary aspects

The shape and nature of criticality itself in higher education is socially constructed and contextually permeated (with localised [sub-] disciplinary, institutional, departmental and other variations), but mediated by individuals. In many ways criticality can be viewed as a local disciplinary social practice, although one that has significant cross-disciplinary commonalities and underlying intellectual rules.

Disciplines are both liberating, in that they provide tools for the development of ideas and critique of these, and restrictive in that it may be hard to work outside their recognised understandings. As Barnett (1997) wrote:

> *Bodies of knowledge are also sites of organised power (Foucault, 1980). Their definitions of the world impose themselves on those who fall under their sway. Those who inhabit them rarely experience their oppressive character, but even those distinguished in their fields can feel that burdensome weight if they dare to step outside the presupposition of understanding and the sanctioned forms of inference and presentation of "evidence". Both the social sciences and the natural sciences brook no dissent from the uninitiated: the non-experts are expected to accept the definitions of the world that are imposed on them* (p.17).

Becher and Trowler (2001) suggest categorisations of broad disciplinary areas according to "characteristics in the objects of enquiry; the nature of knowledge growth; the relationship between the researcher and knowledge; enquiry procedures; extent of truth claims and criteria for making them; the results of the research" (pp.35-36). Analyses of disciplinary variation such as those of Becher (1989) and Biglan (1973) suggest division of disciplines into "hard pure", "soft pure", "hard applied" and "soft applied". Disciplines will be more or less "convergent" in terms of these patterns (Becher and Trowler 2001). Social work is a "soft applied" discipline according to this categorisation.

Curricular aspects

Some comments on disciplinary related characteristics of the curriculum will be helpful here. Neumann et al (2002) discusses first the curricular

characteristics of "soft pure" (e.g. history, modern languages) disciplines and then makes additional comments about those that are "soft" and "applied" (e.g. social work). Many of the "soft pure" characteristics apply also to "soft applied" disciplines. In "soft pure" disciplines, the curriculum tends to be "reiterative" and "holistic" (ibid p.406). "…knowledge in the soft pure domain gives rise to curricula which can be described in Bruner's (1967) term as spiral in their configuration, returning with increasing levels of subtlety and insight into already familiar areas of content" (Neumann et al 2002, p.407). "…typically, soft pure fields… [help] students develop critical perspectives" (ibid p.407). "Content in soft pure disciplines tends to be more free-ranging and qualitative [than in hard pure disciplines], with knowledge building a formative process and teaching and learning activities largely constructive and interpretive" (ibid p.408).

Soft applied fields [such as social work]… "are [also] concerned with the accumulation of knowledge by a reiterative process shaped by practically honed knowledge and espoused theory. However, it seems that when validating knowledge, applied fields…rely less than their pure counterparts on examining conflicting evidence and exploring alternative explanations. Similarly, precision and accuracy as criteria in validating knowledge are not as highly regarded in applied as in pure fields (ibid, p.408).

How people learn

In addition to these understandings of the nature of criticality, we are interested in looking at the *detailed processes* by which students learn to be critical. Specifically, in the traditions of (1) micro-analysis of classroom interaction (e.g. Mercer 1995) and (2) communities of practice analysis (e.g. Lave and Wenger 1991), we will investigate how students are engaging in the classroom.

Micro-analysis of classroom interaction

In *The Guided Construction of Knowledge* (1995) Mercer focuses on fine-grained teaching and learning interactions and the way language works in classroom talk. Mercer is interested in:

a) how language is used to create joint knowledge and understanding

b) how people help other people to learn

c) taking account of the special nature and purpose of formal education.

How language is used to create joint knowledge and understanding

Mercer argues that knowledge and understanding are generated by working with information, rather than simply *exposure* to information. This creation of joint knowledge and understanding takes time so context and continuity are essential in its creation. *Context* is all things relevant to the talk. It may be physical objects, but also "the talk itself creates its own context; what we say at one time in a conversation creates the foundation for meanings in the talk which follows" (Mercer 1995, p.68). *Continuity* relates to the conversational linkages over time and to

developing understandings "The process of creating knowledge in classrooms is one in which, for it to be successful, themes must emerge and continue, explanations must be offered, accepted and revisited, and understanding must be consolidated" (ibid, p.68). In discourse, "topics are introduced, discussed and then the conversation moves on. Some never surface again, but others do; when they do, this is because they are made to do so by the speakers" (ibid, p.68). Mercer discusses the notion of long conversations, where an extended dialogue continues over the whole set of interactions between teacher and students, rather than just within individual lessons (ibid, p.70). As Mercer points out:

> It is difficult for me to demonstrate the importance of 'continuity' in this book because it cannot easily be done by using short extracts from longer conversations. Even if I presented transcripts of whole lessons, these would still amount to extracts of a kind, because they are one of a series of related language events for the people involved. When a teacher and a group of learners are working together, the talk in one lesson can be thought of as one part of a 'long conversation' that lasts for the whole of their relationship (ibid, p.70).

Edwards and Westgate (1994) offer an explanation for the importance of talk with others as a means of clarifying our thoughts to ourselves:

> We sharpen our own understanding by telling or attempting to explain to others. As we hear ourselves say what we think, or what we think that we think, we can monitor this objectification of our thoughts, judging its accuracy or adequacy and modifying it where necessary. Without plentiful experience of 'talking things through', we would be denied access to that 'inner speech' (Vygotsky, 1962) through which we organise our thinking (Edwards and Westgate 1994, p.11).

Mercer (1995) proposes three ways of talking and thinking which influence the nature of the knowledge that is created. The three ways are:

(1) *Disputational talk*

This "is characterised by disagreement and individualised decision-making. There are few attempts to pool resources, or to offer constructive criticism of suggestions… Disputational talk also has some characteristic discourse features – short exchanges consisting of assertions and challenges or counter-assertions" (Mercer, 1995, p.104).

(2) *Cumulative talk*

In this, "speakers build positively but uncritically on what the other has said. Partners use talk to construct a 'common knowledge' by accumulation. Cumulative discourse is characterised by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations" (ibid, p.104).

(3) *Exploratory talk*

Here "partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas.… Statements and suggestions are offered for joint consideration. These may be challenged and counter-challenged, but challenges are justified and alternative hypotheses are offered. Compared with the other two types, in exploratory talk *knowledge is made more publicly accountable* and *reasoning is more visible in the talk*. Progress then emerges from the eventual joint agreement reached" (ibid, p.104).

Mercer (1995) proposes three levels of analysis to identify the nature of the talk:

(1) *Linguistic*

What kinds of 'speech acts' do the students perform? (Do they assert, challenge, explain, request?) What kinds of exchanges take place? (That is, how do speakers build their conversations, how do they respond and react to each other's talk?) What topics are discussed? (Mercer 1995, p.105).

(2) *Psychological*

What kinds of 'ground rules' do the speakers seem to be following? How do the ways the speakers interact, the topics they discuss and the issues they raise, reflect their interests and concerns? To what extent is reasoning visibly being pursued through the talk? (ibid, p.105).

(3) *Cultural*

[This] involves some consideration of the nature of 'educated' discourse and of the kinds of reasoning that are valued and encouraged in the cultural institutions of formal education. In academia, as well as other places, typically accountability, clarity, of constructive criticism and receptiveness to well-argued proposals are valued (ibid, p.105).

How people help other people to learn

Mercer discusses the role of language in the process of learning as a social activity. Vygotsky drew attention to the fact that "learning with assistance or instruction is a normal, common and important feature of human mental development" and that "the limits of a person's learning or problem-solving ability can be expanded if another person provides the right kind of cognitive support" (Mercer 1995, p.72). Vygotsky (1978) talked about the zone of proximal development which he defined as:

> *The distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers* (Vygotsky 1978, p.86).

Vygotsky argued that the learner, through structured learning activities *undertaken in interaction with* the teacher or more capable peer, would progress through the zone of proximal development.

Jerome Bruner "uses the concept of 'scaffolding' to highlight the way that one person can become very intimately, and productively, involved in someone else's learning" (Mercer 1995, p.73). McCarthy and Raphael (1992) wrote that this type of educational scaffolding involves structuring tasks through instruction, modelling, questioning and feedback, until the learner can operate independently (McCarthy and Raphael, 1992, pp.17-18). This is a very particular quality of individual support. "A crucial, essential quality of 'scaffolding' in all settings must be that it is the provision of guidance and support which is increased or withdrawn in response to the developing competence of the learner" (Mercer 1995, p.75).

Mercer (1995) points out that people can also learn effectively in many other ways, apart from carefully scaffolded activities, (e.g. unguided exploration,…listening passively to lectures or stories or by being directly instructed) (Mercer 1995, p.74). Edwards and Westgate (1994) point out that observation and imitation are other ways of learning (Edwards and Westgate 1994, p.11).

Mercer discusses peer collaboration. He suggests it can work through speaking to a more able peer, or to someone less able when one has to explain something to him/her or to equals when ideas build up between the people. Mercer also points out that collaboration between peers might not necessarily be successful (Mercer 1995, p.92). "Working with a more knowledgeable and capable partner who dominates decision-making and insists on the use of their own problem-solving strategies may hinder rather than help the less able" (ibid, p.93). Mercer also suggests being aware of collaborative talk that merely works with "unexamined platitudes which are never made explicit" and therefore not open to "criticism and modification" (ibid, p.95).

Certain conditions seem to enable more successful collaborations than others. Research by Paul Light indicates some conditions that facilitate learning, such as if children *have* to communicate "to make plans explicit, to make decisions and to interpret feedback seems to facilitate problem-solving and promote understanding" (cited in Mercer 1995, pp.92-93). Another indication of the outcomes of collaboration is to look for whether understanding is procedural or principled (ibid, p.93). This might relate to whether ideas are generalisable or not.

Another potential source of problems for collaboration is that of gender relations. "Although there is a lot of individual variation amongst males and females, male students of all ages tend to dominate discussions, to make more direct and directive comments to their partners, and generally tend to adopt more 'executive' roles in joint problem-solving" (Mercer 1995, p.96). Edwards and Westgate (1994) report that a pervasive source of inequality, now extensively documented, is the uneven share of communicative space taken by women in mixed groups, their much greater vulnerability to interruption than men, and their relative tentativeness in bidding for turns and determining or changing topics.

Mercer suggests that friendships are also important. What are the

social relationships between the participants? For example, Azmitia and Montgomery (1993) found that collaborators who were friends did more "explicit" reasoning (cited in Mercer 1995, p.97). Possibly they felt more comfortable about risk-taking.

Mercer sums up what the research describes as favourable *conditions* for the emergence of effective, collaborative talk. First, partners must have to talk to do the task, so their conversation is not merely an incidental accompaniment. Second, the activity should be designed to encourage co-operation, rather than competition, between partners. Third, participants must have a good, shared understanding of the purpose of the activity. And fourth, the 'ground rules' for the activity should encourage a free exchange of relevant ideas and the active participation of all involved. It also helps, as one might expect, if partners have an already established, friendly relationship (Mercer 1995, p.98).

Finally, we should note that Mercer, Vygotsky and Bruner are talking largely about cognitive development, whereas we are extending their notions somewhat in this project into emotional and skills development.

The special nature and purpose of formal education

Mercer describes specific aspects of classroom education, focusing particularly on the nature of classroom discourse. "'Discourse' [in the sense Mercer uses it here] means language as it is used to carry out the social and intellectual life of a community" (Mercer 1995, p.79). The educational goals are "to get students to develop new ways of using language to think and communicate, 'ways with words' which will enable them to become active members of wider communities of *educated discourse*" (ibid p.80). Mercer argues that "Learners can only develop confidence in using new discourses by using them. Discourses are forms of language which are generated by the language practices of a group of people with shared interests and purposes" (ibid p.81). Learners need opportunities to practice using these discourses. These views on discourse and its purpose relate closely to the views of Wenger (1998) on induction into communities of practice.

Mercer explores how individual speakers must operate within particular educated discourses in a formal educational environment:

> …one important characteristic of educated discourse
> is that speakers must make their ideas accountable to
> specified bodies of knowledge and do so by following
> 'ground rules' which are different from those of most
> casual, everyday conversations. Of course, there is
> not just one educated discourse. For any academic
> subject or any occupational group, there are many
> ways of using language which are not merely a matter
> of using the right 'local' technical terms. There are
> various ways of presenting information, telling stories
> or arguing cases (the 'genres' of English literature,
> scientific reports, business letters and so on) which are
> conventional in particular 'discourse communities'. There
> are 'ground rules' for using language, solving problems

and getting things done which have developed and which usually become taken for granted by members of each community….People who make important creative contributions to any field of knowledge, even those who transcend the 'ground rules' and reshape the ideas of a community, can always 'speak the discourse (Mercer 1995, pp.82-3).

Mercer explores what the role of a teacher or group leader at university level can be in extending the discourse capabilities of students. He argues that "…teachers have to start from where the learners are, to use what they already know, and help them go back and forth across the bridge from 'everyday discourse' into 'educated discourse" (Mercer 1995, pp.83-84). Northedge develops this, discussing what the role of the teacher should be in a group discussion at first-year undergraduate level:

Without a teacher a group discussion tends to gravitate towards a common denominator in terms of an 'everyday' discourse that everyone can understand and use effectively. Whereas, a teacher can, without necessarily dominating the discussion, help to translate some of what is said into terms of the 'academic' discourse, so that the group members can see how the ideas they already hold can be made to work within that discourse. The teacher can help to 'frame' the discussion by keeping some of the general purposes and styles of argument of the new discourse in play within the discussion, by posing questions, suggesting 'real-life' cases for discussion, probing arguments, asking for evidence and so on. In the context of a discussion it is not necessarily the teacher's role to 'explain' things (which would tend to cut across the dynamics of a collective 'discussion' – and a collectively maintained consciousness). It is more to be the person who brings the language and the frames of reference of the 'expert' discourse into the 'collective consciousness' of the group (cited in Mercer 1995, p.82).

Communities of practice

Wenger (1998) and Lave and Wenger (1991) focus on learning where participation in communities of practice engages people in a process whereby we learn who we are, develop identities, and understand the world as having particular meanings as well as learning particular knowledge and skills which are incorporated in these meanings, identities and practices. Identity relates to the social and cultural formation of the people. *Identity* is more than adherence to some rules. It involves a persona which the person will take with them into other areas of their lives:

The experience of identity in practice is a way of being in the world…Who we are lies in the way we live day to day, not just in what we think or say about us, though that too is part of the way we live. (Wenger 1998, p.151)

Community membership and identity formation are inextricably linked:

> *Community membership gives the formation of identity a fundamentally social character* (Wenger 1998, p.163).

Another source of identity formation, alongside participation, is reification. Reification gives form to experience in abstractions/concrete objects/laws/procedures.

> *…the process of reification…is central to every practice. A community of practice produces abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms and concepts that reify something of that practice in a congealed form* (Wenger 1998, p.59).

Usually, there is a period of induction into a community of practice, when the participants have a protected practice period which gives them both authentic practice and a legitimate status. This period is called that of *legitimate peripheral participation*. Peripherality provides an approximation of full participation that gives exposure to actual practice. It can be achieved in various ways, including lessened intensity, lessened risk, special assistance, lessened cost of error, close supervision, or lessened production pressures (Wenger 1998, p.100). The newcomers learn to speak and act and be in a way which makes sense to the community of practice and satisfies its entry requirements. Legitimate peripheral participation involves identity transformation as well as a changing nature of participation.

Learning is viewed as a dynamic, contextual and unique process. Learning, in this view, is more a matter of participation and practice, rather than individual acquisition of knowledge through instruction. Rather than formal, traditional learning settings, we must look to engaging students in practice in productive ways:

> *…if we believe that information stored in explicit ways is only a small part of knowing, and that knowing involves primarily active participation in social communities, then the traditional format [of neatly packaged information dispensed in e.g. lectures] does not look so productive. What does look promising are inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, of opening their horizons so they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities they value* (Wenger 1998, p.10).

Assessment

It has been recognised that there are strong links between learning, feedback and assessment (see Black and Wiliam 1998; Madaus 1988 [school-level education]; Becker, Geer and Hughes 1968; Brown and Knight 1994, Elton and Laurillard 1979; Snyder 1970 [for higher education]). In their review of how assessment can best support learning, Black and Wiliam highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation, confidence building,

detailed and substantive feedback, collaboration rather than competition and the need to encourage students' metacognitive skills and so ability to monitor and direct their own learning.

Implications of these understandings of how people learn and how assessment works

In order to probe our data according to these understandings of how people learn we ask the following questions: How is the tutor modelling criticality? How are students encouraged to be independent? What is the nature of this independence? What is the scale of the problems/issues with which students engage in class? What level of theoretical frameworks are they asked to engage with? How ambitious is the required engagement? What is the range of processes going on? What are the pedagogical strategies of the tutor? What opportunities do the students have to engage in criticality and related activities? What are the processes of critical development that we can discern? What are the likely implications of such processes for long-term critical development? For example, how does Wenger's account of induction into a community of practice relate to being critical of and within that community? How does the type of learning happening relate to assessment in the unit? How do these developmental processes relate to specified course outcomes and key skills? How do they relate to existing social work education concerns, especially the recent evaluation by Trevithick et al. (2004) which draws our attention to the particular aspects of teaching and learning of communication skills of concern to social workers? How do they relate to social work education policy (i.e. the *Social Policy and Social Work Subject Benchmarking Statement* 2000; the National Occupational Standards for Social Work 2002; the Department of Health Requirements for Social Work Training 2002)?

Concluding comments

These theoretical conceptions of criticality have implications, not just for the development of social work students, but also for students in other social science and humanities disciplines, for school pupil development and for adults in their professional and civic lives.

In the following sections, we will investigate how our data on the unit, *Skills development and theorising practice*, relate to the theoretical aspects discussed in this section.

Research findings

Introductory comments

Our research findings have two main themes. The findings indicate a carefully constructed teaching/learning environment in the observed sessions. The teaching is highly skilled, principled and thoughtful and closely aligned with the unit and programme documentation. It seems likely to facilitate the development of appropriately educated nascent social work professionals in whom criticality has been fostered. What is achieved, however, with students at this level is necessarily limited in terms of criticality development. In any discipline, it takes time, experience and sustained effort to develop to the level of *Late Criticality* so only a limited amount can be expected in an initial qualification programme.

In this section, the research findings are presented in brief according to thematic categories emerging from the data. A full version of this report is available on the SWAP website (www.swap.ac.uk).

External context

Various matters external to the group sessions influenced and shaped their running. Throughout the unit under discussion, the students were in practice placements three days a week and this formed a powerful backdrop to the sessions. In effect, the students were in what Wenger (1998) calls a period of *legitimate peripheral participation*, the period of protected practice which gives both authentic practice and a legal status. Another influential contextual factor was that the students had previously attended a range of units related to social work theory and legislation. Especially relevant was a unit called *Practice Methodologies* which introduced a series of theoretical frameworks, such as systems theories and psycho-social casework, which addressed the practice of social work. A further influential contextual factor is the impact of the students' own biographies. We will now probe these influences more closely.

Timing of placements: relationship to professional practice and place in the degree programme

The unit sessions provided part of the protected space required in *legitimate peripheral participation*. As described in the unit handbook:

> These workshops are 'safe' in the sense that members of the public are not being exposed to students' behavioural experimentations. In the real world of practice the quality of our interactions, our ability to hear, understand and help problem-solve, may have very significant 'life-and-liberty' implications for service users and others. Within these workshops students may, at worst, be embarrassed or discomforted, but perhaps this is a legitimate expectation for professionals who are employed precisely to engage with people who are in more fundamentally unsafe environments through poverty, mental ill health, abuse and other similar troubles. (p.18)

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The conditions of "lessened intensity, lessened risk, special assistance, lessened cost of error, close supervision" that (Wenger 1998, p.100) suggests as appropriate in this period are all met in the unit sessions.

Continuation of skills training during the placement was also sometimes seen as desirable by the students, but that would have major financial resource implications:

The unit sessions function as a focusing experience for many students, bringing together the various elements of the social work programme.

The sessions also provided an opportunity potentially for the students to distance themselves from and reflect on their practice teacher's advice in a constructive manner.

In terms of our theoretical conceptualisations, during this period of legitimate peripheral participation, the students' *declarative knowledge* from previous years is able to interact with *knowledge why* and *knowledge of what it is to be* in this unit. The students each contribute to this enhanced knowledge base with stories from their lives and professional experiences and reflections in both the video workshops and theorising practice sessions.

In the review by Trevithick et al (2004) concern was expressed that students may not transfer skills learned in classroom situations to work with clients (Trevithick et al 2004, pp.26-27). We hope that having concurrent listening skills learning sessions and practice placements encourages transfer and that the theorising practice sessions, with their direct focus on the theorisation of particular experiences, encourages transfer and continuing reflection in the future.

Strains on placements

As well as a time of rich learning opportunities, and perhaps even because of that, the period of legitimate peripheral participation is potentially a time of considerable challenge and stress. The placements place considerable pressure on the students and pre-existing vulnerabilities can be exposed. Some placements are more problematic than others. Clearly, the path of identity formation, which Wenger (1998) suggests is part of the process of becoming a member of a community of practice is not straightforward or easy for some students at least. Existing identities as competent, adult persons can be challenged.

Individual differences and links with life experiences

The students are all able to draw on a rich and sometimes troubled range of general life and professional placement experiences in the unit. They vary in their capacities to benefit and focus, according to various factors such as the nature of these experiences and the students' ability to process the experiences.

Internal context

In the video workshop sessions, the students engage in the kind of listening they will have to do during their social work practice. Activities parallel the authenticity of practice which is a central element in Wenger's framework of legitimate peripheral participation.

Different learning environments

At least two potential models for running the unit sessions were in play: one supportive and gently questioning and the other challenging (perhaps confrontational) with more fierce questioning. In the case of the first approach, there is a body of tacit understandings underlying the video workshops. There is the notion of respect and support for others, within the current group and future clients to whom these social work students will be listening. This is likely to be related to the security the individual members of the group feel in questioning themselves. Another underlying tacit assumption is that people can be encouraged to change behaviours by questions being gently asked and new meanings and potentially changed behaviours arrived at for both current group members and future clients. This change can be encouraged by strategies such as reframing and interpersonal interaction which is empathetic and authentic.

With the other approach, a different learning environment appeared to operate. Tutors were either less expert or deliberately chose to foster a more challenging approach. There is some evidence that the students find this problematic.

Mercer's conditions for the emergence of effective collaborative talk appear to be key. First, partners must *have* to talk to do the task, so their conversation is not merely an incidental accompaniment. Second, the activity should be designed to encourage co-operation, rather than competition, between partners. Third, participants must have a good, shared understanding of the purpose of the activity. And fourth, the 'ground rules' for the activity should encourage a free exchange of relevant ideas and the active participation of all involved. It also helps, as one might expect, if partners have an already established, friendly relationship (Mercer 1995, p.98).

Modelling by the group leader for student learning was also identified as important.

Individual styles, skills and priorities of the tutors

The last point leads into a commentary on the implications of the individual styles, skills and priorities of the different group tutors. There was preparatory training for tutors and extensive unit materials. However, the specific choices about functioning of the theorising practice sessions are left to a large extent to the group tutor and group members. In addition, over time new members of staff have joined the group of tutors. Issues of the extent of staff training required and conformity and control over the subsequent staff leadership of units arise.

The quality and/or the aims of the leadership in both the theorising practice and video workshops sessions varied. The case study students suggested that different tutors had different skill levels in managing the unit sessions.

Realistic expectations

Interlinking between domains

The unit was intended to have a synthesising, interlinking function and also to enable the students to develop as autonomously reflective practitioners, able to continue learning beyond the limits of their time in formal training. There is evidence that this interlinking, synthesising, reflective process was taking place.

This interlinking process was facilitated by the timing of the unit at the same time as the students' second practice placement. It was also facilitated by the range of previous units the students had attended on social work theory and legislation, especially *Practice Methodologies*. This theoretical exposure was reinforced by the unit materials and tutor's use and recycling of the relevant concepts.

As well as development of the students' capacity to synthesise *between* the domains, there is also evidence of extensive activity and development *within* the different domains.

Development within the domains

There is considerable evidence that activity likely to encourage the development in the domain of the self took place in the video workshop sessions as well as in the domain of action, and there are also connections to theory. The workshops operated around development of the self in terms of capacities to listen, be self-critical and the development and enhancement of related skills and personal qualities.

Levels of development

Interlinking between domains and development within domains seems to be happening. However, at what level, in terms of our developmental framework is this taking place?

If we look at the different elements of our developmental framework in terms of *engagement with critical tasks*, the students operate largely within the terms of the concepts presented in the previous course *Practice Methodologies*, the unit handbook and as reinforced by the unit tutor, Phillip Brown. The students are at the stage of trying to enhance their listening skills and of learning to use the language of listening skills and counselling literature, rather than having mastery over them. In a practical sense, they need these skills for their practice placement. They appear to agree with the values underlying these types of listening skills and do not challenge them. Similarly, in the theorising practice sessions, the students work within, rather than challenging, existing theoretical and practice frameworks.

In terms of *control over definitions of topics, questions and actions*, the

students do not have major control over the content of the video workshops element. They work within a set of values, concepts and sessions structures which are presented to them. They are told they will work in pairs in the video workshops. They are told that the videos will be wiped after the sessions. They have some control as a group over relatively minor issues such as whether they develop a timetable for who will speak and listen each week. They can choose what stories to tell when it is their turn to speak. They can ask minor questions about interpretations of particular listening behaviours, for example, body language. Possibly, in the theorising practice sessions, they could have exerted more control. And the students did request work on clients with communication difficulties, resulting in watching a video of a pre-school for children with special educational needs and having related discussions in two sessions.

In terms of *explanatory frameworks*, the students show considerable evidence of being able to understand, articulate and use the concepts of the unit in the video workshops. They use the terms, such as "reframing", "mirroring", "clarifying questions", and "empathy", accurately and easily in their feedback comments and class discussion. However, apart from Jim, who presents a limited challenge at different times as described below, there is little evidence, either in the video workshops or the theorising practice sessions, of challenge to any of the theoretical concepts the students are working with.

In terms of *understanding the territory, including power relationships*, there is little evidence of whether the students understand the power relationships involved in the territory because of the nature of the sessions. The video workshops focus on skill enhancement, not critique of the need for and shape of these skills. The theorising practice sessions focus around explication and amelioration of complex individual cases, rather than critique of underlying structural factors. Certainly critique is introduced even in the first year undergraduate units in lectures. However, at this advanced professionally oriented stage of the degree, the focus is on producing effective practitioners, in the sense of being able to practise effectively and safely within existing parameters. In this sense, our data supports the concerns expressed in the review by Trevithick et al (2004) that much work on interpersonal skills in social work education is divorced from a critique of structural oppression (Trevithick et al 2004, p.21).

In terms of *constructing an extended case*, there is little scope for examining that in this unit (although there is considerable data available on this in other analyses available in the criticality project, see www.critical. soton.ac.uk). However, in terms of representing knowledge, the students know how to present their comments in this workshop, adopting suitable terminology and underlying understandings.

There were few signs of the advanced characteristics of professionalism that Barnett advocates and describes given the relatively powerless position that the students occupied within their agencies. The students are working within the limits of their practice agencies, of budgets and so on.

In sum, in the theorising practice sessions the students are operating somewhat critically but according to tasks set by others, using acceptable evidence, making linkages across domains, but without much challenge to given frameworks, values and modes of operation. Even working within the existing understandings and parameters set by others is a struggle so only a limited amount should be expected, but it is important that the seeds are planted. The students are able to make links between theory and practice when encouraged by the classes, tutorials, assignments and their placements in conjunction with the theorising practice sessions.

In effect, students are operating somewhat critically but according to tasks set by others, using acceptable evidence, making linkages across domains and undergoing changes in the self, but without much challenge to given frameworks, values and modes of operation. In terms of our theoretical framework, the students are still working at the levels of *Early Criticality* and *Mid Criticality* where they work within existing frameworks or pose limited challenges to them.

Becher and Trowler (2001) suggest that knowledge in applied social sciences such as education, law, social administration [social work] is "functional; utilitarian (know-how via soft knowledge); concerned with enhancement of [semi-] professional practice…" (p.36). In the case of our students in this unit, this appears to be the case. However, we would suggest that the strong element of personal growth indicated by our case study suggests something more than utilitarian development. It suggests that the students are growing towards competence in the social work practitioner community of practice, as well as undergoing personal development, with the implied changes in identity, knowledge and skills.

Availability and development of resources

Which resources, in terms of our theoretical understandings of resources, do the students have at the start of the unit and which are enhanced by the unit?

In terms of the important resource of knowledge, the students all have *declarative knowledge* of the theories underlying the video workshops. The students all have *procedural knowledge* of listening to clients and more generally in life from the beginning of the unit. They all have knowledge of *why* it is important to listen carefully as their remarks cited above make clear. They also have *knowledge* of what it is to be in the sense of being on placements where they are trainee social workers who have to listen and in the sense of being human beings who listen carefully to friends and colleagues.

In sum, the observed students have many of the resources described above at the beginning of the unit and which seem likely to have been enhanced by the unit. They do not have the resources of an assured position in the social work profession, a legitimate, permanent place in the community of practice. Nor do they have mastery over the concepts and practice of the community or the capacity or desire to critique those concepts and practices. These are nascent professionals.

Skills sessions and theorising practice in the overall curriculum

Organic curricular development

Learning of any one element works organically through multiple exposures and experiences in the degree programme as a whole. One tutor's comments on assessment in social work echo the literature on curricular development in soft applied fields where knowledge and skill development is seen as reiterative and holistic. Lattuca and Stark (1994) suggest that "The softer fields acquire knowledge more often by recursive patterns of research than by systematic accretion. These iterative research strategies use multiple perspectives and pursue knowledge in several directions simultaneously, leaving room for curricular diversity" (p.419). Although our students are not doing research in the unit sessions, they are using multiple perspectives, including personal and professional and peer experience, theoretical knowledge and practical activities to build up various types of knowledge.

Alignment between unit documentation, programme documentation and classroom practice

In addition to the inter-linkages between different units in the degree programme, we see alignment of aims, required knowledge, skills and ethical perspective between related documents including programme specification, specified learning outcomes, unit documentation, and the student handbook.

Session interactions

In this discussion of session interactions, we look at various aspects of student learning: a quick revisit to our theoretical understandings; context, continuity and long conversations; the nature of the talk we see in the sessions and levels of analysis; a discussion of how people help other people learn; and the role of practice in learning.

How people learn

In explaining how people learn, Mercer (1995) stresses the importance of *working with*, rather than simply *exposure to*, information. This relates to other theoretical concepts used in this study such as Wenger's view of practice as the important training ground with its interaction and talk with other people as well as the actual doing of tasks. Wenger (1998) argued for active, meaningful productive activities for people to learn. Mercer's views also relate to our discussion of language as a resource as a medium of exchange and understanding between the individual, the social, and constructions of reality. Mercer's ideas are based on Vygotsky's (1962) notions of the importance of 'inner speech' and talking things through in order to organise our thinking.

We see the type of activity advocated by these theorists throughout the unit. The whole video workshop element of this unit involves working with concepts, raising awareness of their theoretical meaning and practice

manifestation, enacting them in practice, fine tuning their use, and reflecting on their use and meaning. The theorising practice sessions involve discussion of practice experience, drawing out the theoretical and legal connections, and considering practical ways forward. The extended examples of the theorising practice session and the video workshop in Appendix One illustrate these activities.

Context, continuity and long conversations

Given the time and complexity involved in constructing knowledge and understanding, Mercer (1995) and others have stressed the importance of *context* and *continuity* in the learning situation. We have already discussed *context* extensively. *Continuity* is illustrated in the numerous examples of long conversations, started prior to the course especially in the unit *Practice Methodologies*, which are developed in the unit. These long conversations illustrate the links between concept presentation, awareness raising, enactment and reflection – not necessarily in that order.

Continuity is also present in the shape of ongoing personal support for the students by the tutor and by one another. Another manifestation of continuity of ideas and the ongoing engagement of the students is the discussions of poems and their underlying messages.

Nature of the talk and levels of analysis

We see a considerable amount of talk in this unit which combines many of the characteristics that Mercer (1995) describes of *cumulative* and *exploratory* talk. Mercer relates his descriptions of types of talk (cumulative, exploratory and disputational) to the levels of analysis: linguistic, psychological and cultural.

At first sight, much of the talk in the unit appears to have the characteristics that Mercer (1995) describes of *cumulative* talk where the "speakers build positively but uncritically on what the other has said. Partners use talk to construct a 'common knowledge' by accumulation. Cumulative discourse is characterised by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations" (Mercer, p.104). Much of the talk in this unit is positive. A common knowledge is certainly being built up around the counselling concepts on which the unit is based. Ideas certainly cumulate from week to week, reiterated and reconfirmed in different micro-situations. However, closer examination reveals certain characteristics of *exploratory* talk where "partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas" (Mercer, p.104).

The talk helps understanding of how others learn through the provision of:

• guidance by a more expert person

• instruction

• modelling

• questioning

• feedback

- unpacking of feelings

- Personal revelation and anecdote

- Student to student learning

- Imitation of the tutor and other students

- The nature of collaboration

- Gender relations

- Social relationships

Conclusions

In the research findings, we hope we have presented our findings within a coherent theoretical framework, thus addressing some of the theoretical concerns raised about the social work literature in this area in the review by Trevithick et al (2004).

In terms of the guided construction of knowledge, we see a carefully structured learning environment, one where language/talk is used to create knowledge and understanding through a carefully nurtured context and continuity. We see an environment where the tutor and other students assist students to learn. We see the careful development of the use of the formal discourse in the area.

We note that the dominant note in the video workshops is construction of understandings in relation to listening skills and the gentle critique of self and personal listening skills. This is probably appropriate to the nascent professional stage of the students. We do not see critique of the values or theories underlying the video workshops.

Teaching/Learning Recommendations

Based on our findings in this project, we would like to make some recommendations about (1) the teaching and learning of listening skills and (2) the theorisation of practice. We will relate these recommendations to our theoretical framework.

Professional practice

Recommendations

Experience in professional practice is central to students being able to:

- see how theory they have been exposed to might relate to practical, "real" situations rather than just being abstract conceptualisations

- come to theorising practice sessions and to listening workshops with *needs* for the skills and insights those sessions can offer and the facility to go away to practise them

- raise problems relevant to themselves in the sessions and have other group members who have had similar experiences so there can be group (as well as individual) reflection on the different experiences.

Therefore, theorising practice sessions should be timetabled either concurrently with practice placements or after the placement has taken place. Possibly video workshops could be timetabled before practice placements, but then students are less likely to be able to appreciate the full relevance of the sessions and are more likely to approach them from a lower level of personal and professional development. On the other hand, they might be better prepared for their practice placement listening requirements.

The practice experience can and should be actively exploited with opportunities provided in classroom sessions to reflect on the experience, to make connections with theory and legal aspects in a safe but challenging environment.

Given that the social work practice experience is likely to be difficult and challenging, it is probably appropriate that space also be provided in the curriculum for students to air problems without necessarily being expected to intellectualise them. This space may well be in tutorials or space may be provided whereby students can congregate informally to exchange views rather than function in isolation. However, time in units such as those in this study can probably more usefully be spent on more structured analytical activities.

Experience of life is also a useful resource that students bring to the sessions and should be exploited as fully as possible through opportunities being given to relate and reflect on the significance of life events as was the case in the video workshops observed. This benefits both the individual student concerned, and the other students in the group who benefit from the pooling of experience and participation in the reflection process. Having a group of students with a wide range of backgrounds and ages is probably particularly beneficial in that the pool of experience to draw on is wider. Short classroom sessions are probably not an appropriate place to explore

major life events and difficulties. Classroom sessions can provide teaching and learning settings, rather than therapeutic sessions for deep-seated personal difficulties.

Students come to the sessions as *individuals* with differences and may be more or less amenable to improving their listening skills and making connections between theory and practice. They will have greater or lesser capacities to do so. This may relate to their life and professional experiences, rather than innate abilities.

Tutors should also be aware that students may be facing considerable strains and challenges on their placements of one kind or another and should be sensitive to how these difficulties may affect the confidence and well-being of the students. One positive aspect is that sessions on listening skills and theorising practice may be therapeutic and problem-solving at a professional level.

Links to our theoretical understandings: Barnett's three domains

The above recommendations address aspects of the three *domains* proposed by Barnett (1997): formal knowledge, the self, action and the world. Knowledge and experience from all three domains should be encouraged to merge and interact purposefully in a constructive learning environment. The recommendations above relate to our concept of certain *resources* being necessary for criticality to take place – knowledge of what it is to be (personal and professional experience), procedural knowledge (e.g. listening skills), declarative knowledge (of theories and research), knowledge why (e.g. listening skills are important) and knowledge of the language used in professional settings and social work education. They also relate to the resources of personal qualities such as confidence, capacity to face difficulties and resilience. In addition, they relate to notions of *communities of practice* whereby the doing of practice, as distinct from just being exposed to the concepts, is central. They also relate to Mercer's concerns about how students can help other students to learn. The types of discussion engendered by drawing on experience in professional placements and experience of life encourages productive peer collaboration, guided by a tutor, where 'expertises' can be drawn on; where 'real' problems are discussed, and where participants have a good understanding of the purposes of the activity.

Classroom context

Recommendations

The context inside the classroom is vital to the running of the sessions. We have seen two potential models in this research: one supportive and gently questioning and the other challenging (perhaps confrontational) with fiercer questioning. Our recommendations will relate to the gentler model, given its efficacy in the sessions observed and the apparently problematic nature of the other model (although our research exposure to the problems was only partial).

The tutor has a leading role in creating the atmosphere in the sessions. His/her behaviour should model the behaviour and values desired of the students, in this case supportive and respectful although gently

questioning behaviours and values. S/he is also modelling the shape of the professionalism that is acceptable and desired. The unit materials have a complementary role in framing the context for the sessions. The students are active agents in the session processes and context, not passive recipients. They have to be engaged meaningfully in interactions and given space to shape them within the parameters of boundaries set by the tutor and the programme and the broader social work training requirements. They can make requests for how they want sessions to be run, within broad parameters, and input in other ways in various sessions outside their expected input. Some of the rules of the session will be explicitly articulated by the tutor and by the unit materials. However, some will be tacit.

The classroom has a special role in that it provides a safe space for the students to reflect on practice and on themselves. This process may be challenging, complex and difficult.

If a gentle, respectful atmosphere is created:

• the students can offer one another support in challenging situations

• supportive behaviours can be learned or reinforced

• if a problem situation does arise, it is easier for the tutor and students to retrieve calm and control without serious consequences to individuals or the group

• volunteers for particular roles such as the listener in the video workshops are likely to be plentiful.

The physical setting of the sessions should be appropriate and those arranging the sessions aware of potential effects of the physical setting. The furniture should be democratically arranged, rather that in hierarchical rows in order to facilitate discussion and with sufficient space so that listener and speaker in the video workshop are not hemmed in by their audience.

The tutor in such groups has a demanding and highly skilled role. S/he may require training over and above existing qualifications in order to carry out that role.

Links to our theoretical understandings: Mercer's classroom environment

The above recommendations relate to our theoretical consideration of *contexts*, to Mercer's writing on the kind of *classroom environment* and talk which is likely to promote learning and to the kind of *resources*, especially in the shape of values and constructively critical and supportive learning environment which students need in order to be critical. The supportive atmosphere relates to the notion of *legitimate peripheral participation* with its protected environment for those trying to join the community of practice. The central role of the tutor relates to our understanding of the disciplinary or community of practice representative initiating students in the practice. The notion of the active role of the student, functioning within a classroom environment, relates to our notions of the interactions between individuals and surrounding structure.

Developmental level and range and level of resources

Recommendations

The students in this type of group are nascent professionals. They are struggling to grasp basic theoretical concepts and how they might relate to practice. They can make these connections with appropriate support. They are struggling to cope effectively and safely with practice situations. As such they tend to work within existing understandings, rather than challenging those basic understandings. It is not realistic or responsible to challenge or expect them to challenge basic practice and widely accepted theories before the students have a basic operational understanding in place, although the bases for enabling them to do so should be laid in the shape of clear understandings of theories, the ability to make connections between theory and practice and the hint of possible constructive criticism in the future. Indeed the students should be encouraged to see their own development as a process of continual change and self-reflection. Skills workshops and theorising practice sessions should not be merely a matter of learning to exercise skills mechanically and without question.

Links to our theoretical understandings: mid criticality

In terms of our conceptual framework, these recommendations relate to our *developmental level* of mid criticality and to the *range and level of resources* (in terms of knowledge of various types) that the students have available to them at this stage of their professional careers.

Skills sessions and theorising practice in the overall curriculum

Recommendations

The initial presentation of theories and concepts is likely to have taken place previously in units further down the degree programme and the use of these theories and concepts in sessions such as those of video workshops on listening and theorising practice sessions is part of the reiterative curricular process. Development is organic. The skills and knowledge involved in theorising practice may be being developed and consolidated concurrently as they were in this degree programme in various written assignments. Much previous exposure to theory and research and practice is likely to advance and be consolidated in theorising practice sessions. The particular contribution of the video workshops is that the students may be developing or extending demanding, complex and constructive self-critical skills and capacities to be critical of peers. These capacities are demanding and complex and support is needed for this.

Students should have a clear understanding of *why* they should do certain tasks. This understanding can be constructed through explanation in the unit materials, explicit explanation by the tutor, demonstration of the usefulness of the sessions through their content and encouragement of students to reflect on meanings and space for them to articulate these as with the student who brought in the poem about listening which was circulated to the entire group.

Links to our theoretical understandings

The recommendation on reiterative visiting of concepts relates to our understanding of curricula in soft applied fields. The recommendation on presenting knowledge outside the sessions under discussion relates to the resource of declarative knowledge and how that might be developed. The recommendation on students understanding why they should do certain tasks relates to the resource of *knowledge why*.

Session interactions

Recommendations

In these sessions, there should be a reiterative process to allow students to raise awareness and to accumulate knowledge through revisiting concepts by various devices such as:

• modelling

• imitation

• highlighting examples of specific concepts in feedback to students and through personal revelation

• extending understanding by illustrating with further examples thus drawing attention to extended and generalisable application of a particular point

• drawing attention at various opportunities to the connections between theoretical or legal knowledge and the practice experience of students

• articulation of concepts, practice and reflection on the above, including the unpacking of feelings

• practice in using concepts and skills

• direct instruction

• questioning

• feedback

• personal revelation and anecdote to illustrate points

• student to student collaborative learning.

This will lead to fine-tuning and greater depth of understandings and use. Both tutor and students should be active in carrying out these moves in sessions in order to move understandings and capabilities forward.

The tutor should model the language of the theoretical frameworks underlying the session and highlight instances of particular cases which illustrate the language. S/he should encourage the students to use this language through creating an atmosphere where they feel willing to experiment with the language, have space to make the input where the language is used.

The practice situations should be as authentic as possible in terms of the listening activities and the issues raised in the theorising practice sessions. However, the situations should not be too distressing given the constraints of time available for repair in the sessions and also the danger of students being confused by different roles of supportive friend to someone in distress and reflective colleague.

The students should have as much opportunity as possible to work with the relevant concepts and skills, rather than simply being exposed to them. Exploratory talk, in Mercer's terms, where students engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas should be encouraged. Opportunities for collaborative interactions should be provided as extensively as possible.

Care should be taken that women, or any other potentially disadvantaged group, should have as much opportunity to contribute in class as others.

Links to our theoretical understandings

In terms of our conceptual framework, the recommendation on language relates to the resources the students have to have in order to be critical, to function effectively as professionals. They need to have the resource of language and also the knowledge *why* they need to and *how* they should use the language. It also relates to Wenger's notions of adopting the concepts and language through practice.

The recommendation on authenticity relates to Wenger's notion of initiation into communities of practice. Practice should be protected to some extent in the tradition of legitimate peripheral participation, but it should be authentic as people learn by doing, by practising.

The recommendation on reiteration relates to Wenger's notions of learning through practice and Mercer's of learning through working with knowledge, rather than just passive exposure to it. It also relates to the idea of long conversations as described by Mercer and Maybin (Mercer 1995). It relates to the reiterative conception of soft applied curricula (Becher and Trowler 2001; Neumann et al 2002).

The recommendation on devices to encourage understanding and development also relate to the recommendations of Mercer regarding appropriate classroom talk. The recommendations about student agency and activity relate to Mercer's notions of peer interaction and feedback.

Assessment

Recommendations

Formal summative assessment is not necessary for students to take such a unit seriously. The purpose of formal summative assessment may be rather to allow external accreditation, rather than contributing to the learning of students. Such assessment may have an impact on the notion of these sessions as safe spaces where the students can experiment and make mistakes without serious implications.

Informal formative assessment was ongoing throughout the unit in the shape of commentary on the listening and speaking performances of colleagues by other students and by the tutor. Each student was asked to self-assess their listening and speaking performance. These are practices and personal resources which should be encouraged to develop in order to facilitate the development of reflective practitioners.

Links to our theoretical understandings

The recommendations on the role of formative assessment in encouraging student learning relate to our theoretical understandings of the role of formative assessment in encouraging learning.

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