**Practice Educator Training**

**Integrating Theory and Practice**

![MC900056147[1]]()

**Training Devised and Presented by:**

**Lorna Fitzpatrick**

**HEI Partnership Officer**

**West London Project for the Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers**

**Integrating Theory And Practice**

Practice educators often recognise that some students on the social work degree can be intimidated by the word 'theory' or may dismiss it as irrelevant in relation to ’doing the real job’, that it’s a purely academic concept. Indeed, some practice educators experience those same feelings/attitudes. This immediately inhibits effective learning about theory.

How do you feel when **theory** is mentioned?

![MC900423171[1]]() ![MC900434379[1]]() ![MC900433819[1]]() ![MC900433821[1]]() ![MC900423173[1]]()

![MC900423165[1]]() ![MC900423163[1]]() ![MC900434415[1]]() ![MC900437990[1]]() ![MC900434411[1]]()

![MC900434373[1]]() ![MC900440452[1]]()![MC900436145[1]]()

This handbook, and the training session that it accompanies, is intended to allay some fears about ‘theory’ by encouraging practice educators to explore the theoretical basis of their own work and test out practical ways of supporting students to integrate theory and practice.

**Why Do We Need To Apply Social Work Theory To Practice?**

Theories can help us to make sense of a situation. Using theory, we can generate ideas about what is going on, why things are as they are etc. For example the information obtained as part of an assessment can seem like a jumble of information - applying theory can help "make sense" of the information.

Using theory can help to justify actions and explain practice to service users, carers and society in general. The aim is that this will lead to social work becoming more widely accountable and ultimately more respected.

In work with individuals, making use of the theories which may relate to their specific situation will give us more direction in our work with them.

Using theory can give an explanation about why an action resulted in a particular consequence. This can help us review and possibly change our practice in an attempt to make the consequences more effective.

It is clear then, that theory is important in practice - both for work with service users and for social work to be more valued in society.

**“To practice without theory is to sail an uncharted sea………”** (Susser 1968)

![MC900198192[1]]()

As practitioners, we rarely consciously think about our theory base and how that influences our choice of methods. As practice educators we have to support students to do just that.

The Requirements for Social Work Training state that all social work programmes must:

"Ensure that the teaching of theoretical knowledge, skills and values is based on their application to practice." (Department of Health 2002)

Whilst the basic aspects of social work theory will be taught in the University setting, practice learning is about students transferring knowledge and applying theory to practice.

Practice learning is about relating the ideas learned in university to the placement setting. In order to link theoretical knowledge to practice, students need a firm grasp of the fact that theory is something everybody uses every day in social work and that theory has a clear link to ‘common sense’/’what works’/’real life’/’practice wisdom’! Without this, theory can become something which seems abstract and this develops the idea that theory is something you learn at university and then forget when you enter the "real world" of work.

**By understanding and applying theory to social work practice, practitioners can feel assured that an effective service is being provided.**

**What is ‘Theory’?**

Theory can be described as knowledge, skills and values.

**Knowledge**

Knowledge is what you know, eg theoretical perspectives; legislation; policy; research findings; methods of intervention.

**Skills**

Skills are about how you apply knowledge, eg application of methods of intervention; assessment skills; advocacy; negotiating.

**Values**

Values are our underpinning ethical principals, eg respect, empowerment, challenging discrimination.

Theories in social work are basically an attempt to explain situations and social relationships.

The chart on the following page shows how theories, beliefs, skills, values, legislation & methods inter-relate.

#### **Knowledge Base Of Social Work**

Jill Lawrence, Bradford University 2006

# **Theories about how people behave*:* examples**

* Behaviourism
* Rogers: Person centred.
* Transition theory
* Attachment Theory
* Freud: psychodynamic

**Theories about how society functions: examples**

* Marxism
* Feminism
* Systems-theory
* Functionalism
* Relativism
* Social Action
* Social justice

## **Belief systems*:***

**Examples**

* Christianity
* Islam
* Humanism
* Secularism
* Atheism
* Judaism
* Hinduism

**Approaches/methods of intervention: examples**

* Case work
* Group work
* Case Management
* Counselling
* Brief therapy
* Motivational interviewing
* Cognitive therapy
* Crisis intervention
* Task centred approach
* CBT
* Family Therapy
* Person centred planning
* Advocacy
* Community work
* Medical/Social models

### **Research: examples**

##### (Bradford University 2003)

* **Tracking Children and Accomplishing Risk.**
* **Improving protection.**
* **Sexual identity and women's lives.**
* **Engaging faith communities.**

## **Ethical issues:**

**examples**

* Power relationships
* Conflict of interests
* Limited resources
* Authority
* Compulsion
* Nature/ nurture
* Dominant ideas
* Confidentiality

**Legislation: examples**

* Mental Health Act 1983
* Community Care Act 1990
* Children Act 2004
* Asylum and Immigration Act 2004
* Human Rights Act

## **Skills: examples**

* Counselling; congruence, acceptance and empathy
* Communication: listening, open questioning, body language, use of silence, written, BSL.
* Advocacy
* Networking
* Report writing
* Decision-making
* Assessment; assessing risk, assessing need.
* Risk management
* Use of policies and procedures
* Constructive feedback
* Challenging

**Identifying Our Own Theory Base**

The activity on the following page is intended to help practice educators reflect on some of their own experiences, beliefs, values and attitudes. It is also a useful activity to use with students.

Those aspects of our life will influence which theories we are ‘attracted’ to; feel most comfortable with; integrate into our practice (and our personal lives)

There are additional factors that may inform, influence and develop our theory base and influence our practice.

Lorna Fitzpatrick 2000

**Who we are informs our theory**

**Our theory influences our practice**

**Our practice informs our theory**

**The process influences who we are**

**News media**

**What works**

**Professional judgement**

**Agency policy/practice**

**National policy**

**Who Are You?**

Politics Sexuality

* party politics
* activism Smoker

 Abuse survivor

 Gender

Manners ‘Race’/ethnicity

 Hobbies/interests

Age Physical ability

 Class

 Religion Relationship status

HIV status

 Substance user/abuser

Financial status

past/present Parental status

debts

 benefits Family

 Beliefs Values

 Mental health status

 Academic experiences

* + - * + grammar, comprehensive, private
				+ qualifications
				+ age on leaving
				+ higher/further education
				+ graduate
				+ subjects

Consider the above aspects of your life (note that it is not a definitive list).

How do your beliefs, experiences, values, upbringing, attitude affect your practice?

Lorna Fitzpatrick 2000

**Theory, Research, Legislation, Policy and Skills**

The following questions are designed to help practice educators recognise how theory is applied in their work place.

**![MCj02929620000[1]]()**

The questions are useful prompts for discussions with colleagues, managers and students.

* Do you favour a particular approach to practice?
* Do you have a particular perspective?
* Can you think of research findings that influence your practice?
* What policies, both national and local, impact upon how you work?
* What key pieces of legislation affect your practice?
* What skills or interventions do you use on a daily basis?
* What skills or interventions have a limited application?

**Summary**

Practice educators are not expected to be experts on all theories and models of social work practice. Students are expected to bring practice models they are learning in the classroom into their supervision with you and to try, with your support, to apply these to their placement experience.

Recognise that no single theory can explain everything. When a person engages in an action (or inaction) the reason for their behaviour can be rooted in a range of causes or motives.

Equally, recognise that some theoretical approaches just don't work with some people. Applying Brief Solution Focused Therapy can be really effective with some people. For other people, it leaves them cold.

Take a critical approach to theory. If it doesn't "work", why not? Can you adapt aspects such that it is helpful?

Always apply the social work value base to theory - much of the theory used in social care practice and social work is drawn from outside of the profession. Theory may have its roots in education, psychology or management. As such, it may not incorporate social work values – practice educators and students must take responsibility for ensuring that they do.

Understanding and applying the theoretical basis of social work ensures effective and accountable practice.

**And finally, never be intimidated by theory. You use it every day.**

**Supporting Students to Integrate Theory and Practice**

The following pages give examples of activities that can aid the process of integrating theory and practice.

They will be used in the training sessions to give practice educators an opportunity to test them out and to identify the theory base of their own work.

You will notice that there is reference to reflective practice. Reflective practice can be seen as rather a vague concept and its value has been contested. If we re-frame it as ‘analytical’ practice, then we can see that it is about knowing why and how we do what we do – accountable practice.

“The reflective practitioner will, in fact, need to possess a very active and genuine commitment to the development of their own and others’ practice. This will involve students, social workers, practice teachers and others in more than some rather vague ‘reflection’ on their practice. It will require them to focus significant attention on:

* Understanding and analysing what they do, how they do it and why they do it in the ways they do
* Explaining this coherently to themselves and to others
* Identifying their own learning needs
* Knowing what they have learned from particular events &
* **Awareness of how their practice is influenced by experience, by knowledge of theory and research, by their own values and by the ethos of the organisation they work for”**

Philip Gilligan

“Reflective Practice”

Bradford Family Service Unit

Unpublished discussion paper 1999

**A Framework For Reflective Practice**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Describe the situation** | **How did I feel about what happened?** | **What was I trying to achieve?****What did I do/say?** |
|  |  |  |
| **What were the consequences (for me, service user(s), others)?** | **What knowledge & skills did I draw on?** | **What values underpinned what I was trying to do?** |
|  |  |  |
| **What other choices did I have?** | **What have I learned from this experience?** | **What might I do differently next time?** |
|  |  |  |

|  |
| --- |
| **What are my learning and development needs now?** |
|  |

**Lorna Fitzpatrick 1999**

**Bradford MDC, Practice Educator Training**

Johns’ Model For Structured Reflection

**Phenomenon**

* describe the experience

**Causal**

* what essential factors contributed to this experience?

**Context**

* what are the significant background factors to this experience?

# **Reflection**

* what was I trying to achieve?
* why did I intervene as I did?
* what were the consequences of my actions for me, the service user/family, my colleagues?
* how did I feel about the experience as it was happening?
* how did the service user feel about it?
* how do I know how the service user felt about it?
* what **factors/knowledge** influenced my decisions and actions?

# **Alternative actions**

# what other choices did I have?

# what would be the consequences of these other choices?

# **Learning**

* how do I now feel about the experience?
* could I have dealt better with the situation?
* what have I learned from this experience?

*Cited in* “Reflection in Action

Terry Fisher & Jon Somerton

Social Work Education (19) (4) 2000

**Kolb’s Learning Cycle: A Framework for Reflective Practice**

**Experience**

 [What happened? Descriptive]

What did you do/say?

What did others do/say?

What were your thoughts?

What else was happening?

How did you feel?

##### **Experimenting**

[Trying out new ideas]

What will you do now?

Action plan

Why? When? How?

How can I help?

What other help might you want?

How do we know if it’s worked?

Reviewing

###  **Reflecting**

[Looking more deeply

at the experience]

Why did you do that?

**Theories, policies, beliefs**

What happened as a result?

What worked well?

What was less effective?

What if?

## **Concluding**

## [Making sense of the experience]

## What can be learned from this?

## Professionally, personally, academically

What might be done differently another time?

**Learning Journals**

The student’s learning journal is an invaluable tool in supporting the reflective/analytical process and for exploring how the student is applying theory to their practice. Practice educators should ensure that they see it on a regular basis and that they engage in discussion of its contents, so that is used meaningfully and can provide evidence of the student’s practice and ability to analyse that practice.

We need to be clear that we do not expect students to write or say ‘the right thing’ – the journal is about learning & developing.

There is scope for creative writing, such as making reference to books, films or television programmes that have stimulated thought. I am currently reading ‘Even the Dogs’, by Jon McGregor. His description of a heroin addict’s experience of a key worker applying Rogerian counselling It caused me to reflect on my final placement experience in a drug and alcohol service’s residential therapeutic community. I was so full of unconditional positive regard – I wonder if the residents knew that?

Some practice educators prefer to see the journal in advance of each supervision, in order to read it and note points for discussion. Students can then use the journal to note any learning from that discussion. In this way it becomes an inter-active learning tool, rather than a hurdle to be jumped.

**Activities**

Activities in this section have been adapted from ‘Learning & Teaching in Social Work’, pp 18 – 120; Beverley, A & Worsley, A; Palgrave; 2007

**What the papers say**

This activity takes the emphasis away from the academic context.

Use an article that relates to the social work/care environment.

The student should read the article and pick out key aspects of the story.

What are the key messages of the article?

What are the ideas that underpin the messages?

Where do those ideas come from?

What if those ideas were applied in the work setting?

It may be useful to use a range of newspapers to gain different perspectives!!!

**Look at it another way**

Both student and practice educator select a piece of work from the student’s case load – one that both are familiar with.

As ‘homework’, each takes a different approach, e.g. counselling, cognitive behavioural approaches, empowerment, crisis intervention.

In supervision, each presents their understanding of the approach and how it ca be applied in this instance.

Consider:

What the impact might be on the person/s involved

Is one approach more suitable than another?

If so, why?

How effective might the approach be?

How might practitioners have to adapt their approach to suit individual circumstances?

Does the service user have any choice in this?

**A novel idea**

The above approach can be used with a chapter from a book, e.g. What if Jane Eyre had ever told a social worker about her experiences in her boarding school?

Maybe if Bridget Jones went to an alcohol service?

**Mapping**

This requires the student to list the areas of knowledge that they have acquired in university. They can then use a ‘spider-gram’ to identify how that knowledge relates to a particular service users, or to the service generally.

This will allow the student to begin to understand the complexity of people’s lives and the body of knowledge that needs to be applied to an individual situation.

**Case Studies**

The following case studies are intended to offer practice educators an opportunity to consider how to apply some of the activities with students.

D is currently on her second placement – in a child and family fieldwork team. She has an MA in Psychology but her social work experience is limited. She was allocated a step-parent adoption to complete two weeks ago but has not yet made contact with the family. You, as practice educator, believe that D has been given all of the information that is required to undertake this task. You ask D about how she intends to proceed with the work and D tells you that she has done a lot of reading about adoption, but she can’t quite decide how to approach this. She also states that she doesn’t know what to say to the family when she does visit.

***What would enable D to engage with this piece of work?***

T is on his first placement, with young people who are leaving care. He has had several years experience of working in a resource centre for adults with learning disabilities. The young people feedback that T is very knowledgeable about systems, processes and sources of support, advice and information and that “he helps to get things sorted”.

T is required to write assessments of three of his pieces of work and, in order to work towards this, you have asked him to bring a draft of one piece of work to supervision. You have particularly asked him to cite evidence of meeting the competences and to discuss the theoretical perspective[s] that informed the work. He comes to supervision with a list of Key Roles that he has ticked off but states that he couldn’t write anything about theory because an emergency came up with one of the young people. When you ask him to tell you what theoretical perspective[s] he would have written about, he looks blank.

***How can you assist T in identifying a theoretical basis for his work?***

G is undertaking her first placement in a community based voluntary sector agency. She is a committed and enthusiastic student. Prior to starting her placement she asked for a reading list so that she could understand the work that is done in the agency. You are impressed by her commitment and by her knowledge.

It is custom and practice that students in this setting develop an understanding of group work and of the issues facing people through co-facilitating group work sessions. G is going to co-facilitate, with you, a support group for young people who have experienced/witnessed domestic violence. She is to take the lead role.

G plans the sessions meticulously – what issues will be covered; proposed outcomes. She makes extensive notes for her academic work – cites literature read, theories used. A room has been booked for the sessions. G has arranged that the workers who are key workers for the young people will bring them to the centre. On the day of the first session, G phones in sick but is back the following day. You have managed the session well and want to tell G about it. She is pleased that all went well but is off sick for the next session too. You sense that she is avoiding the sessions. You are also aware that G has not yet met with individual service users, although she has made extensive work plans and notes. G tells you she scared of things going wrong.

***How are you going to help G move on from the planning stages?***

***How will you help her practice her theory?***