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Embodying Reflective Learning in Social Work Education

ABSTRACT

There is a growing academic tradition of employing strategies of reflective skills in social work education. Social professions are often dealing with the problems of vulnerability and complexity that exist when encountering clients' needs. This article arises from the experiences of the author in providing reflective learning to health and social work students in Sweden. This study opens with evoking the concept of knowing and learning. It explores and discusses the epistemological basis of reflective learning to facilitate students' knowledge creation, clinical reasoning and reflective learning in front-on planning interventions. Further, the study present an example of a reflection scheme matrix applied in the social work and social pedagogy bachelor educational programs at Malmö University to support student's reflective learning and information gathering while planning social interventions for service receivers. During their reflective reasoning, students are supported in their process of reflection to gain control of the unsorted information and shape a base for their own internal experience while analysing the client's situation. This article concludes with commentary about reflective learning potential including making sense of real professional situations, meaningful engagements and how to prepare students for professional operationalisation in complex, unpredictable situations.

Keywords:

health and society, teaching in higher education, challenge-based learning (CBL), social work education, students learning.

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INTRODUCTION

There is growing interest in reflective practice within social professions and several social work educational programs. Historically, social work has never been a static profession (Queen, 1922). According to Payne (2021), social work is a profession dealing with social problems. It is strongly connected to existing societal conditions, social developments or inadequacy, welfare movements and, as a profession, providing a specialised service for disadvantaged people (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002; Lavalette, 2011; Payne, 2021). Therefore, the effort of educational programs are necessary to provide reflective professional expertise and trained workers possessing knowledge and skills for dealing with the problems of vulnerability, poverty and complexity that exist when encountering clients' needs and their support (Payne, 2021). Numerous authors have discussed how social work students build their professional knowledge, theories, practice research and expertise (Adams et al., 2002; Mirick & Davis, 2015; Saltiel, 2003). The face-to-face work in the novice work context is demanding and students may have difficulties in grasping the whole complexity of their clients' situations. Perhaps the most important function of the educational effort has been the development of didactic consciousness regarding disseminating challenge-based learning (CBL) and reflective discussions of existing practice experiences by exploring the real nature of everyday practice rather than the teaching methods of the bulk of academic schooling (Dychawy Rosner & Högström, 2018; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 1997; Saltiel, 2003). However, despite the popularity of reflective practice and the documented reflections of students – i.e., values and anti-discriminatory practice or their practical work placements experiences in accessed essays – there has been little research into how students incorporate reflection into their learning process during education and training.

This inquiry is founded on my questions around issues in higher education about how we as teachers should and can define or explain tools and properties that are needed for the student to develop their own well-founded opinion and to assert it through their personal repertoire of professional skills. An example of this can be a process embedded in preparing students' reflective learning on and in professional actions. My starting point is that the process of reflective learning represents the transmission of several diversified areas of knowledge and competencies to the same one when taking into account the different appearances of knowledge, its origin and composition (Ruch, 2000; Saltiel, 2003; Schön, 1983, 1987).

The purpose of this paper is thus to view today's concept of knowledge from a historical perspective and to deepen our understanding regarding reflective learning in developing students' critical thinking, which hopefully can lead to individual skills that are more integrated into professional actions. For that purpose, I have chosen to start from Aristotle's view of knowledge since it is treated in relation to virtue and capability, both of which are considered essential in social work (Adams et al., 2002; Halland & Kilpatrick, 1991; Rasmussen & Mishna, 2003; Thompson & West, 2013).

This paper draws upon research undertaken in 2020–2021 with a group of university partners collaborating in the Erasmus+ project (SP Young, 2019) within Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education². The project consist of various developmental stages (Dychawy Rosner, 2020). The aim of this project is to make students of social professions to be aware and develop their skills and knowledge about theories, practice and research related to social work with young people who are in social ill health and vulnerable socio-economic situations. This work engaged international partners in the review of young people's living conditions in contemporary European societies, as well as development of a course curriculum, course module, accompanying handbook and organise a pilot educational program that prepares social professions students for work with youth (SP Young, 2019).

This article focuses specifically on what is broadly termed as 'reflective learning' (Pallisera et al., 2013). The literature offers a range of definitions of what may be meant by reflective learning suggesting that professional knowledge primarily develops through practice and the systematic analyses of experience (Bie, 2009; Ferguson, 2018; Pallisera et al., 2013; Schön, 1983, 1987). More recently, patterns of reflective learning can also be connected to individualisation process and self-reflexivity (Pallisera et al., 2013; Mirick & Davis, 2015). Taylor (1996) defined reflective learning in a generic way as comprising those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations. However, an individual professional decision-making occurs in an increasingly stronger principles of standardisation in decision-making and implementation of social support which strength the assumption that professional decision-making is not always a highly conscious process (Adams et al., 2002; Björk, 2017). Given the practice requirement for critically reflective practitioner and existing demands such as specialisation in a profession that demands a holistic perspective, lack of resources and

² Erasmus+ KA 203 – Social Professions for Supporting Youth in a European Solidarity Context, 2019-1-PL01-KA202-065091.

clinical supervision (Lavalette, 2011; Thompson & West, 2013), it is important to develop teaching tools for reflective learning and instructional design. Examples of urgency of adequate methodological education in relation to student's thinking process is found in recent research. Independently of the work influenced by Schön (1983, 1987) there has been an increasing interest of how reflective activities can be incorporated into learning. According to Boud and Knights (1996), many work strategies such as critical incident analysis or the creation of concept maps have been identified. In the reflective learning patterns it is important to offer for students the opportunity to generate alternative ways of viewing a situation and achieving new appreciations or understandings on what these events mean to them.

In this paper, reflective learning is understood as a process of knowledge creation linked to professional judgement and problem solving by rejecting the linear thinking as the primary methodology for professional knowledge building. It is a process where the emphasis is put on the creative, intuitive, where the student becomes confident in responding to the unknown and unpredictable (Boud & Knights, 1996; Ferguson, 2018; Schön, 1987; Taylor, 1996). As such, the learning process relates to the fact that every professional encounter is unique; that is a social constructionist approach to epistemology of practice, as opposite to existing technical-rationalism seen as dominant approach in social work educational tradition.

This article aims to present an example of facilitative model, so called 'thought and reflection scheme for case analysis', when supporting students' reflective learning while recognising the client's situation. The implemented reflective exercises were undertaken with students in the second year of their social work educational degree course, *Social work: Profession, practice and perspectives* at Malmö University. The exercises aim for personal and professional development where reflective learning plays a fundamental role for students to work on their professional behaviour, tasks and identity. The theoretical findings are based on earlier work on the development of didactics regarding students' formation of knowledge as regards CBL, where learning takes a stand from students' recognitions connected to professional situations occurring in real-life challenges (Dychawy Rosner & Högström, 2018; Leijon et al., 2021). With this article, thus it is hope to contribute to methodological understanding and further discussion on the need for exploration and reinforcement of reflective learning in addressing the mind at work in professional human encounters.

The opening chapter evokes the concepts of knowing and learning. Further, this paper gives an example of a guide for a reflection scheme that is useful when

supporting students' reflective learning through clinical case reasoning and gathering information about their client.

CONCEPTS OF KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

CONCEPTS OF KNOWLEDGE

The concept of knowledge in everyday contexts is used commonly for two main meanings; knowing *that* and knowing *how*. Knowing *that* is verbalised and described as fact-based or descriptive. Knowing *how* is understood as experiencing procedural expertise and is largely action-based. It can take a long time to acquire this knowledge. When a person develops skill or potential ability to perform certain activities or perform certain skills, they have acquired knowledge, competence and potential ability for a certain task situation or context (Brenner, 1984; Fook et al., 1997; Ruch, 2000; Samson, 2015). To be able and master reflection on the professional self as well as reflection in and on action is viewed as an important process in the creation of knowledge in social professions. Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* discusses three forms of knowledge: episteme, techne, and phronesis (Aristoteles, 2012).³ Episteme denotes the theoretical or scientific knowledge; techne the practical-productive knowledge; and phronesis is practical wisdom or judgment. If a social worker lacks judgment, they will not be able to make the right decision and choose the right action. The episteme, namely theoretical knowledge, is emphasised in the school system (Payne, 2021). Techne, practical knowledge and skills, are also considered crucial in tailoring teaching in vocational education to meet the needs of the labour market (Mirick & Davis, 2015). Phronesis is about being able to assess, consider and choose an action in practice (Samson, 2015). As a form of knowledge, phronesis is considered to be practical wisdom and must be seen from a disposition to act in conjunction with deeper thought and reflection on what is relevant for the client.

Several researchers have compared the relationship between data, information and knowledge based on its relevance to purpose, where these are interpreted and given meaning based on where the raw material is validated, i.e., subjected to some kind of sanitation test to become reliable knowledge. These descriptions mean that data, information and knowledge can be regarded as a continuum based on how extensive the processing of reality is. Knowledge can also be related to research and evidence, and connects to various sources that have been subjected to

3 This is a new translation of Aristotle in Swedish, see: Aristoteles (2012).

testing and found to be credible (Saltiel, 2003; SKL, 2014; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). Research evidence is public and explicit. It is not neutral, as it is influenced by choices that the researcher makes regarding which questions are formulated, which method is used to answer these questions and how the analysis is carried out (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Knowledge can also be made explicit as a policy with the aim of bringing about changes in society within institutions. The concept of policy is often interpreted as planned and goal-oriented actions to remedy a problem or matter. For example, by standardising the social services' documentation of clients in quantifiable variables, both between different administrators and over time, it is expected that they will map client groups and follow up their outcomes (Björk, 2017). Within policy actions, there is often an idea, theory and targeting of how a problem should be solved to achieve a certain goal.

There is, however, the need for research on the opportunity given to develop judgment and growth in responsibility in a professional educational context. Studies of caring and social work practice suggested that expertise practitioners need to have the ability to make holistic judgements, sum up situations and adapt tools of practice in the diversity and complexity of work practices (Brenner, 1984; Fook et al., 1997; Saltiel, 2003). Subsequently, the issues regarding knowledge are epistemologically understood as positional phenomenon derived from what is known, how a situation is interpreted and the meaning developed from an experience influenced by the existing social situation (Campbell & Baikie, 2013). According to Saugard (2002), the knowledge perspective in formal teaching is based on several professional and academic conventions.

CONCEPTS OF LEARNING

Learning can be a challenging process for many students of social professions regarding subject matter and assistantship for their clients. Learning concepts have been interpreted in different ways within different traditions. In behaviourism, learning is considered in terms of behaviour change based on the individual's reactions to stimuli in the environment. Behaviourism views the learning of behaviour change, while other perspectives emphasise the link between learning and knowledge. Cognitivism broadened the perspective on learning by considering this in terms of the change in the individual's perceptions, knowledge, mental models and intellectual skills. The starting point here is that individuals are actively acting with their entire intellect through interpreting and developing hypotheses about context and the consequences that different actions can have. In social work, for example, it can be tangible, such as memorising legislation or recognising the theory or specific practice method (Campbell & Baikie, 2013; Teater, 2011).

Cognitivism sees learning as a way of obtaining knowledge, while constructivism sees learning that takes place when knowledge is constructed and developed, i.e., learning when individuals acquire or create knowledge. These perspectives show a more collective and social view of learning, while constructivist perspectives more strongly emphasise individualistic learning. In social cognitivism, the view of learning is complemented by the premise that people can also learn by observing others and relating such experiences to their own situation. Among others, Bandura's Social Cognitive theory is the most influential model for explaining and predicting behaviour change. Social cognitive perspectives have been used to create an understanding of professional socialisation in, for example, social work, i.e., the processes in which people acquire thought and action patterns that are characteristic of a professional role, internalise the group's norms and values (Fook et al., 1997; Teater, 2011), and recognise themselves as the instrument of interventions (Gogarty, 2021). Learning can thus be understood as *implying change* so that the individual (group or organisation) in a certain sense is different from the way they were before this learning took place. Central to this interest in processes was seeing ideas and thoughts as part of ongoing activity. Dewey (1938) believes that thoughts and learning develop in a dialectical process that encompasses experience, concepts, observations and action.

These starting points were important for Kurt Lewin (1951) when he developed his field theory, which perceives an individual's mental experience from the psychophysical field of a surrounding system of tensions and driving forces, i.e., the individual's living space. Mental experience is thus always a function between the individual and their environment. In this paper, these conceptual influences act as a theoretical basis for the notion that learning and knowledge lead to broad changes in awareness, understanding, thought patterns and attitudes. Viewed from a socio-cultural perspective, learning and attained knowledge means not just an individual process of change but also a collective process where people learn and change in some form of interactive and communicative action (Jovchelovitch, 2007).

REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Ferguson (2018), studying how social workers reflect in action, found reflection is often tied in with the use of self and emotional intelligence that could be called internal supervision, although it also has limits regarding the demands the work puts on practitioners besides the implications for clients. To reflect means to

expose something or gain insights and bring the thoughts back to the action, that is to be the subject of the reflection. The process requires a trial contemplation of actions, attitudes, reactions, and thinking (Davys & Beddoe, 2009; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983). Professional work in health, social care and social work is about meetings between people. Reflective paradigms are embraced by the interpretative epistemology, which views reality as contextualised by multiple interpretations, knowing as dialogic and meaning in action, as it can refer to knowledge, skills and professional values as well as personal features (Fook et al., 1997; Ruch, 2000). The personal qualities of the professional service giver are central to how the treatment is experienced by the receiving person (Halland & Kilpatrick, 1991; Samson, 2015). Reflective learning in these processes can be considered to be a product of one or more situations that in one way or another involve relationships, actions and the environment. Consequently, reflective learning is regarded as a vehicle for learning through conscious bringing to the surface different forms of knowledge (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Mirick & Davis, 2015; Ruch, 2000). Ruch (2000) asserts that reflective learning is a holistic, creative phenomenon that acknowledges the complexity of situations and offers more scope to reach informed decisions.

EXEMPLIFYING A MODEL SUPPORTING STUDENTS' REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Based on the principles of elements of constructivism as learning theory, constructive alignment and elements, and CBL, a pragmatic framework for reflective learning was developed to guide students in their ability to elaborate learning (Biggs, 2003; Dychawy Rosner & Högström, 2018; Palliser et al, 2013; Ruch, 2000). A facilitative model was developed at Malmö University for reflective engagement and learning regarding social work students, which was guided by the principles of adult experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1987) and Ruch's (2000) holistic reflective learning. This reflective learning model builds around case analysis that aims for the student to develop a systematic and holistic approach to their future professional actions. According to Taylor (1996), reflective learning as a good social work education calls attention to the teacher role as a facilitator.

In the thought and reflection scheme (MAU, 2020), the teacher's emphasis is placed on starting from the knowledge that the student has acquired in previous study semesters. The chosen "case" is a description of a course of events that a social worker has been through and where there have been no obvious but underlying obstacles in alternatives of action. The case, therefore, requires a deeper analysis, which is done with the help of a model of a reflection matrix called 'thought and reflection scheme for case analysis'. An example of didactic facilitative instruction for reflection and reflective thought around case reasoning is depicted in Table 1.

In this teaching practice, a case is a real event, often a dilemma or an intervention circumstance that does not move forward. The student group is assigned to analyse the situation and one of the participating students is chosen to lead the case discussion. The person who leads receives instructions on being group leader, asks questions to focus on sorting what is said, writes on the board and ensures that the group follows the structure of the reflection scheme.

The model supports students’ reflection and reasoning around a case and illustrates examples of structured questions that can encourage students to deepen their understanding of the multiplicity present in a challenging practice scenario (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1987). The case example used was didactically chosen and incorporated a battery of dimensions that signify constructivist perspectives with a focus on a deeper body of information that needs to be known by students before to build up their client-tailored decisions (Biggs, 2003). These structured reflection instructions help students feel knowledgeable and caring about their clients.

Table 1. Thought and Reflection Scheme for Case Analysis

1. We know this:				
Background and facts regarding the individual case				
2. Thought and reflection scheme:				
Situation:	Explanations:	Measures:	Lack of knowledge?	Intervention proposals:
Event and condition that are unsatisfactory for whom and in what way	Probable explanation or hypothesis as to why this problem/problems arise.	What alternatives to measures are available that can help with solutions? If nothing is done, what happens then?	Is there a need for more information?	Decisions on actions, goals, sub-goals, who is responsible for suggested actions, needed collaborations, etc. What are the expected consequences (positive/negative) of the measures? Who will conduct follow-up, time schedule and how?
3. Deeper/widened frameworks and aspects to consider:				
Legal, financial, organisational, ethical, educational, social or medical nature, etc.				
4. Questions for in-depth knowledge development:				
What training and theoretical approaches have been discovered in working on the case?				

Source: MAU (2020).

This model of a student reflection scheme and guidance bonds the cycle for reflection, reasoning and discussion among peers and small groups with teacher tutoring as a pedagogical tool for learning (Bie, 2009; Campbell & Baikie, 2013; Dychawy Rosner & Högström, 2018). These reflective cycle consists of *mapping* the situation, *reflecting* on the existing outcomes and possible alternatives of the situation which can be foundations or alternative basis in *constructing strategies* for applying actions.

In guiding and building students' existing strengths as they learn to encounter clients' life world through the application of social work it is helpful to consider reflective practice paradigm (Schön, 1983, 1987). Professional reasoning and reflection in knowledge on/in action serves to shape professionals during individually-oriented clinical interventions, to test different approaches and to organise and develop knowledge for actions. To ensure the presence of these conditions, it requires facilitative didactics, a range of supervisory intervention and careful choice of the best way to promote students' learning (Biggs, 2003; Davys & Beddoe, 2009; Ferguson, 2018). An important role of this form of reflective knowing is to identify different work approaches and factors that may affect diverse outcomes of interventions, and to develop students' perceptions of challenges when reflecting over the appropriate use of self (Mirick & Davis, 2015). The structured guiding and reflection scheme collapses the cognitive–affective dichotomy by showing that reflective practice judgements and decisions have to be understood in domains which are uncertain and complex (Ferguson, 2018; Fook et al., 1997; Saltiel, 2003).

The process of reflective learning starts with the individual's reflection when thinking and answering the question guide. All arising perspectives are then discussed in the student's study group and in a follow-up discussion with the supervising teacher. The instructional thought and reflection scheme assists reflection and, with a more structured review of cases, the student practices their ability to develop their perception, explore things more closely, see context and gain new perspectives on phenomena. There is considerable empirical evidence suggesting that social practice wisdom rests upon highly developed intuition which may be difficult to articulate but also goes beyond cognitive learning and reconstructs an individual understanding of the relationship between theoretical knowledge and the nature of social reality (Javchelovitch, 2007; Ruch, 2000). Due to the importance of the teacher to create a learning environment based on constructive alignment, there are also ongoing audit points along with supervision, peer discussion and observation of the student's own reflective process (Biggs, 2003). To achieve a deeper interpretation, the student must be critical and questioning about their

observations and reasoning. The interpretation and reflection must allow the student to understand a little more about why what happened or took place did so in that particular way. It may take prompting to go through the process of addressing and reflecting on things that students or others do not want to see. This process, as it becomes a part of the action of looking for new possibilities, integrates with learning through the student's theoretical knowledge, intuitive understanding and forensic practical wisdom (Adams et al., 2002; Aristoteles, 2012; Schön, 1983, 1987). This kind of constructing knowledge through social interactions and social presence extends beyond cognitive learning patterns and behaviour and an individual is further actively acting through more holistic intellect. This corresponds to constructivist pedagogy emphasising knowledge as having individual meaning (Dewey, 1938).

At the same time, didactic support and feedback during the reflective process, applied in a group or individually, is elemental for students in developing their personal professional-self. Designing interventions is a kind of social engineering-like effort similar to what Habermas (1987) explained as technical attentions in social activity. Social constructivist approach stresses the development of social presence and social networks of those with knowledge relevant to the learning goals. It may be didactically appropriate to open the in-depth analysis section with a question, for example: 'What does the event or story tell you?'; 'What does it say about the client?'; or 'Are there things that you feel are particularly important or areas that you are thinking about?'. Question categories can also be given that can help the student to problematize how they perceived the experience, which will help them to solve fixed thought patterns or problems. In follow-up discussions, the teacher can easily support their reflection with *positive questions*, for example: 'Is there something you like, think is good or interesting in this problem?'. It is encouraging to also be able to see positive sides in what seems problematic. Another didactic focus can be to help the student make comparisons by reasoning more closely about something that they think they have mastered or do not perceive as problematic. For example, the teacher might ask: 'Can you perhaps apply something from the unproblematic to the problematic?'. Bie (2009) also highlights the importance of asking *hypothetical questions* of the type: 'What would happen if you did it differently, how do you think the client would react then?'; 'Can you see possibilities for this situation to be improved in another way?'.

During their reflective reasoning, students gain control of the unsorted information and thereby gain knowledge and a base for their own opinion. When shaping relevant data and reflecting on the arising information, the students must pay attention to their own internal experience and relations while analysing and

considering the client's situation. By thinking, reflecting to understand clinical material and making decisions about how to proceed, they build reflective knowledge about the process and the value of practice experience in a safe classroom environment. Students participating in these pre-professional reflective discussions need to be able to voice their views freely and with sensitivity to others. The teacher's role is to help explore and define students' own positions with regard to the topics and issue at hand within the context of the aims (Biggs, 2003; Campbell & Baikie, 2013; Dychawy Rosner & Högström, 2018; Ferguson, 2018). According to Payne (2021), social work practice typically requires practitioners to integrate the instrumental, cognitive, affective and expressive skills. This supposed to transmit the personality and social work concern of the practitioner to the collective professional community of practice. Broadening of learning opportunities that reflects the changing realities corresponds to Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practitioner, which may be also seen as social constructivist wider knowledge creation through reflection, critical comments, social presence of learning objects and resources. In this understanding, reflective learning is created individually, cognitively as well as socially. Reflective learning as based in constructivist notion of social presence shifts focus from the top down teaching (a reproductive knowledge) to knowledge creation imposed over the bottom up emerged knowledge structures (Knott & Scragg, 2010; Taylor, 1996). It is also found that outcomes resulting from reflective learning process can result in deeper knowledge, understanding derived from meta-cognitions, form of actions, emotions and recognition that there is a need for further behavioural changes (Gogarty, 2021; Ruch, 2000; Schön, 1983). Other important features are the implicit connections in reflective learning in terms of behavioural changes regarding the staff's reactions to diverse environmental circumstances such as, for example, to critically scrutinise practice and when encountering needs of the person who uses services and awareness on existing power relations in these encounters (Dychawy Rosner, 2015; Campbell & Baikie, 2013; Ferguson, 2018; Lewin, 1951).

CLOSING REMARKS

In the past few decades, a growing number of social science theorists and scholars have recognised the need of a shift from professionals being instrumental problem solvers primarily based on technical instructional rationality to more reflection-guided practitioners. This paper has discussed how reflective learning can broaden students' skills and deeper understanding of professional tasks. Higher education

classrooms are not insulated environments. What goes on inside is greatly influenced by what occurs outside, i.e., social influences and contextual dynamics. The implications of teaching reflective practice and case reasoning include inspiring the potential to broaden students' perspectives, which facilitates how they deal with social problems and plan to work with clients. When reflecting to achieve greater clarity about the situation of their clients, students relate all of their forms of knowledge, such as episteme, techne and phronesis, and they explore the use of the self as a tool of learning and assessment. It is identified here that reflective learning requires guidelines, information and facilitative didactics for students to construct their own sense of their abilities for the holistic interventions required by practice. Reflection on how the work can be performed and what kind of knowledge can be obtained from different sources can help in this process, which is significant for the student's development of a professional self.

Individual learning can be more or less socially mediated. This takes place, for example, in classrooms where the teacher consciously builds up dialogic sequences with individual work that involves learning (Biggs, 2003). Further research should focus on facilitative didactics and learning tools that can be useful in the process of reflective learning for the student to become a critical thinker and independent professional being. In addition, more research is needed on learners' different ways of using forensic expertise and thinking to process their experience, information and knowledge.

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