# Developing Students' Professional Competence:
# approaches to postgraduate course design in Social Work

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**Key words**: *curriculum design, postgraduate teaching, experiential learning, reflection, formative assessment*

## Introduction

Fry and Marshall (2002, p.185) suggest that 'curricula need to be constructed with greater awareness of circumstances, needs, ideals and purposes if they are to attract and retain students and staff and be fit for their intended purpose'. This paper discusses the design of a Social Work module on 'Effective Communication with Children and Adults", where the intended purpose is to teach M-level students to a professional standard of competence. A key challenge has been to pitch it at the appropriate level. Since Social Work benchmarks (see QAA, 2001; also DoH, 2002; TOPSS, 2002) relating to 'communication' were (then) available only for undergraduate level, it was necessary to adapt them to ensure M-level standards of teaching and learning. In doing so, reference was made to the following definitions of 'level':

> *'an indicator of relative demand, complexity, depth of study and learner autonomy'* *(Gosling and Moon, 2001); 'an indicator of the relative difficulty or demand of the work and the relative ability of a student for successful achievement of the credit for learning at that level'* *(Moon, 2002)*

A second consideration in constructing the module has been the underlying curriculum philosophy. The models that seemed most relevant to the subject were the 'cognitive', 'experiential' and 'socially critical' approaches to course design (Toohey, 1999).

The cognitive approach involves 'shifting from reproductive learning to thinking, reasoning, understanding and meaning-making' (*ibid.,* p. 55). It allows students to reach a level of analysis they cannot achieve on their own, and encourages higher order thinking and deep learning through rigorous argument. Secondly, the subject of communication in Social Work relies on personal contribution and self-awareness, thus making the experiential approach particularly relevant to this module. This approach emphasises the importance of framing learning experiences around life experiences and requires a climate conducive and safe for such learning. 'Such a climate would be characterised by mutual respect between teacher and students encouragement of collaboration and support among students and openness and authenticity on the part of the teacher' (*ibid.*, p.60). The module also places communication in the context of social processes and the applicability of the learning to social situations. The socially critical approach is therefore relevant too, as it locates understanding in the context of historical and cultural frameworks. To do this demands social analysis and integration of theory gained from other modules, thereby promoting M-level criteria.

**Aims and objectives**

The module aims and learning objectives were developed in order to to satisfy the external institutions, such as the General Social Care Council, the University and key stakeholders (e.g. social work employers involved in the departmental consortium). Learning outcomes were amended, using words such as ' critically examine' 'confidently demonstrate,' 'systematic understanding,' or ' evaluation of theory', so as to meet M-level requirements.

The aims also require communication to be demonstrated as a core social work skill applied across a range of service user groups and diverse contexts. This is more far reaching than the undergraduate aims in terms of applicability to practice. The aims reflect the cognitive approach by demanding higher order thinking and reasoning, and the experiential approach by requiring the demonstration of skills to illustrate a high level of applicability of theory to practice. The applicability to diverse contexts and service users fits the purpose of a course designed to a socially critical approach.

**Curricular content**

The module content was devised in part through consultation with service users. Toohey (1999, p. 30) recommends consultation with stakeholders. The service users, for example, spoke of how sometimes a social worker will walk into a home and turn the TV off without asking. Another spoke of how social workers should smile more and talk of ordinary things not just the problem. A young asylum seeker asked that social workers shouldn't always ask him first about his parents and they had both died. These suggestions have added to the relevance of the programme.

In the experiential approach the ' teacher assists students to design and carry out their learning plans. The teacher is a designer and manager of processes and procedures that will facilitate the acquisition of content by the learners and only secondarily a content resource' (Knowles [1984] cited in Toohey (1999), p. 60). The cognitive approach suggests that opportunities are made for students to engage in active processing and questioning of ideas and also to practice skills. The tutors are primarily facilitators to encourage exploration at a Masters level of enquiry.

The module content was designed to cover the subject matter primarily through participation and reflection. The topics begin with some presentation of theory interspersed with games, quizzes and role-plays. These relate to the student's personal interests as well as to the needs of social work service users, in an attempt to encourage self-reflection and socially critical self-awareness and analysis of verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Some sessions involve outside speakers. For example, a playwright was invited to present his recent play about the Victoria Climbie Inquiry, following which students were asked to consider lost opportunities in this case for a child's communication about the abuse which ultimately led to her death. A foster carer was asked to speak about her experience of communication with children who are looked after by social services, and to model for the students an how experienced practitioner engages in communication with abused and vulnerable children.

Other sessions include practising a range of communication methods, from formal interviewing to play, drawing and story telling. Communication with disabled service users offers a focus for illustrating a number of methods of communication available to people with a range of disabilities. The relevance of the social worker's own channels of communication in the hierarchy of employment contexts is examined, raising political and social issues. The complexities of defining mental illness as a typology of communication is also explored, as well as the forms of communication available to an older person within an institution. In each session students are divided into learning sets that are maintained throughout. A running record is kept of words and

concepts that students have previously not encountered, in order to highlight communication processes within the teacher-student relationship.

**Teaching and learning strategies**

The M-level focus is developed through the seminar and workshop programme and a series of individual tutorials. Lecturers may wonder: How do I teach a student to 'confidently demonstrate', 'critically examine' 'systematically analyse?' This is achievable through the detail of the teaching programme. Peer-supported work is a key component of the teaching strategy, incorporated through the groupwork project. The tutorial system is intended to assist students to develop autonomy in study skills and promote their learning within a specialist area of the subject. Rust (1999, p. ix) emphasises this point when he writes:

> *'Teachers need to be prepared to give up power and instead must want to actively seek ways of empowering the students. We need to move from teachers viewed as subject experts who largely impart their knowledge through telling, to teachers as facilitators and designers of learning environments and opportunities in which students ' find' or 'construct' the knowledge for themselves and develop as independent autonomous learners'.*

The socially critical approach is reflected, in the words of Toohey (1999, pp. 64-65), as

> *'students and teacher engage together in understanding and critiquing social institutions or work on collaborative projects which have some social significance. The teacher's role is to help students understand where their own views come from, to challenge preconceptions and to encourage them to consider other possibilities'.*

This occurs through the group working and problem-solving that is built into every stage of the module programme. A related goal is 'authentic learning', as advocated by Herrington *et al* (2003). They argue in favour of the 'social and collaborative nature of learning on the basis that meaningful learning will only take place if it is embedded in the social and physical context within which it will be used' (*ibid.*). Communication in Social Work is made real to the students through the problem-solving exercises and role plays based on case studies and involving service-users and practitioners. Students are also expected to apply key ethical Social Work principles, such as confidentiality and respect for individuals. Authenticity in teaching methods is central to the socially critical approach.

As Moon (2002) observes, 'self-evaluation' and reflective skills are also essential to the development of criticality. Through reflection on their interaction with peers and staff, students make sense of their own learning (Rust, 1999, p. 119). Reflection is a 'key to processing knowledge and understanding, to take ownership of it and engage in a deep approach to learning' (Fry and Marshall, 2002, p. 194). Hinnett (2003) goes further, asserting that, 'reflection is not simply about acknowledging who we are and what went wrong but who we might become. It is a transformational process'. This notion is consistent with both the cognitive and experiential approaches to course design. Reflection is promoted throughout the module, with short presentations of theory and fact continually interspersed with opportunities for experimentation and risk-taking, followed by guided reflection. The tutors aim to support and advise the process and nurture the students through to an increased sense of self-evaluation, which is then fed back into the group processes. Teaching could include the use of ' mind-maps', which encourage students to be analytical and to conceptualise. Mind-mapping allows for links to be made between ideas, theories and concepts and encourages a focus on independent study (Bochel, 2003) and on 'lateral as opposed to linear thinking' (Fry and Marshall, 2002, p.186).

## Assessment strategy

Assessment, as Fry and Marshall (2002, p. 197) note, 'is a key part of curriculum design and should be fully integrated from the start of the planning process. It is probably the most dominant factor in directing and shaping student learning'. Yet, 'it is often that which is not assessed which is most likely to be neglected' (Bourner, 2003, p. 268.) In this module the assessment in not just terminal but runs throughout, attempting engagement of the students' interest in each session. The learning sets that are established at the beginning of the module continue each week and are the basis of the group assessment.

The principle of 'constructive' alignment proposed by Biggs (1999) was applied to ensure that the M-level standards set through the aims and learning objectives are measured through the formative and summative assessment processes. There are two main components: in small groups, students have to devise and role play a communication scenario that is presented to tutors and service-users; each student also produces an essay requiring engagement with theories of communication and critical evaluation of learning gained from the role play. The summative assessment of the group presentation allows for evaluation of the requirement to demonstrate with confidence the key skills (learning outcome 3). Both the presentation and the essay assess the students' critical application of communication theories and methods (learning outcomes 1 and 2). The module assessment is therefore in alignment with the learning objectives.

The assessment strategy also reflects the use of the cognitive, experiential and socially critical approaches to the curriculum development. The essay fits the cognitive approach (as characterised by Toohey, 1999) because it demands higher order thinking and the demonstration of complex understandings *(ibid.,* p. 57). This complexity makes it important to clarify assessment criteria to students. Hence, peer review of the individual reflection on the group presentation is included so as to add this reflective component and prepare students for the essay. The experiential approach relies largely on tutor judgement. In assessing the role plays, the tutors are assisted by the service-users and practitioners. This should provide increased relevance to professional standards and assessment reliability. Students need to demonstrate their participation, as this method of assessment progresses throughout the module. The socially critical approach is reflected in assessments that necessarily incorporate concepts of social and political relevance. This enables assessment at M-level in alignment with the module aims of critical examination of theoretical frameworks underpinning communication in Social Work, as applied across a range of service-user groups and diverse contexts.

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