

## Consolidating 'reflective practice': development at the end of a professional doctorate in Counselling Psychology

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### Introduction

This article presents a proposed Module designed to assist third year counselling psychologists to make the transition to qualified status, specifically in relation to authoritative reflective practice. Trainees and colleagues have noted the challenge for students in developing their reflective practice capabilities, feeling confident, holding their own authority, and having growth competence going forward. Using models of deep and reflective learning, and relevant curriculum design educational principles, a new module is proposed that makes extensive use of multi-faceted learning opportunities to foster a range of beneficial intended and incidental learning outcomes.

A major aim of the Counselling Psychology (CoP) Professional Doctorate course at London Metropolitan University (LMU) is to establish reflective practice knowledge and skills. It is arguably a challenge to foster this development in an academic programme of study. The clinical 'placement' component of learning is hindered by a shortage of trained CoP supervisors. Thus, many students on placement are exposed to the reflective (and other therapeutic) orientations of supervisors of a different discipline or even profession. In my view, there is a missing component on the CoP course regarding providing students a structured opportunity to reflect upon the complete experience of the course, to consolidate their learning and experience of reflective practices (*outside* of formal assessment), with the direct facilitation of the CoP faculty.

It's not easy to enable CoP students to take authority, and experience their own capability, in relation to some highly complex and bewildering human phenomena, such as the psychological treatment and support of people with a diagnosed mental illness. It is recognised that reflective practitioner skills underpin deep therapeutic and and inter-personal work and are a core CoP professional identity (e.g. HPC, 2009).

The BPS and Health Professions Council (HPC) in 2012 revalidated and reaccredited the LMU CoP course. They were particularly keen for students to

obtain the support they need to make the transition successfully into and out of the programme. They want trainees to grow as reflective practitioners and to develop critically self-reflective thinking skills (HPC, 2009). Students manage high anxiety levels during studies, and the faculty has a role in helping students both manage and learn from (and develop through) those experiences. It would be helpful, in my view, for trainees to have more opportunities, later in training, to utilise such learning opportunities in relation to the entirety of their training experience.

CoP students generally wish to work as therapists, and many seek NHS jobs (but a proportion come from, and return to, overseas work) as a counselling psychologist. First year CoP trainees often lack clinical experience, and the admission requirements are more relaxed than in clinical psychology. Students have to show good *potential* to become a reflective practitioner, but often have limited experience of it in practice. Hence, they arguably have further to go in their training to 'gain' this. CoPs seek similar or the same posts jobs as clinical psychologists in the NHS and other institutions, and argue strongly for their equivalence of competence. The work is highly challenging to one's skills and authority. It is therefore important that CoP trainees are skilled and confident enough to offer deep meta-reflective awareness and to hold it with clear authority, post- qualification.

CoP students must have a psychology degree approved by the BPS. Due to lower competition for places, the academic calibre of the trainee cohort is not comparable to clinical psychology cohorts. One could argue that LMU CoP trainees' confidence and skills in critically evaluative and 'deep learning' (Biggs, 2003) may need extra facilitation to foster a commensurate understanding. My experience of teaching third-year students at the very end of training is a need for more confidence and sophistication in understanding, approaching, discussing and utilising reflective practice, with real *conviction*.

Equally, my experience of working as a clinical psychologist, supervisor, and lecturer with applied psychologists and trainees grappling with the psychological complexity of complex clients, teams, and services, is that reflective practice is easily undermined and cast aside, especially in systems under stress. The NHS and other care institutions are under great strain now and for the foreseeable future. CoPs therefore need to be able to engage in, model and guide for others, and maintain under duress, sophisticated reflective practice, so as not to succumb to the corrosive pressure for more procedural practice. Their professional integrity, and societal contribution, depends upon it.

The counselling psychology profession (to which I come as an outsider, as a clinical psychologist) emphasises the development of a 'philosophy of practice' by each student over three years of training. It invites students to consider, on an ongoing basis, their individual development as a person in relation to their professional (and 'profession') constructs. This is a foundation for their becoming reflective

practitioners, and represents a key area of overlap between personal and professional learning (e.g. Schon, 1987; Eraut, 1994; Argyris and Schon, 1996). Reflective Practice is recognised, by our faculty and some students, as something the course could improve upon. Yet it is particularly difficult for students to generate a philosophy of practice in relation to a profession that continuously questions its own very existence! Trainees must acclimatise to an identification with a 'thing' that is nebulous. Thus the qualification transition is crucial, moving away from a large institutional training programme into the professionally qualified workplace.

A consolidation module is therefore needed that should foster a meta-reflective view upon three years of development through informational and transformational learning (Kegan, 2009). Opportunities will be generated, using their actual experiences past and present, to reflect upon the nature, process, and value of that 'learning', such that a fuller appreciation, sensitivity and respect towards such change – and learning processes – can be gained and/or consolidated, and seen as relevant to what their clients/colleagues may also experience (Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1987; Lavender, 2003.). Students will be helped to identify their own resources and tendencies in relation to their reflective awareness and practice (Gibbs et al, 1984) by engaging in semi-guided activities on topics they choose, and sharing their discoveries and observations with each other so that they can distinguish different levels of reflexivity (Marton and Booth, 1997). It will thus be an explicitly developmental opportunity to reappraise, and perhaps 're-describe' (Karmiloff-Smith, 1992) their grasp of reflective awareness/practice, using the whole of, the end of, and the transition of, their training process as the raw materials to work with. The approach would be somewhat Vygotskian, providing a *transitional* (more than instructional) 'scaffolding' (Bruner, 2009) space for the participants to learn through and within.

## **Educational Principles**

Deep learning and reflection is a key principle in this project (e.g. Dewey, 1933; Biggs, 2003). Students' reflection upon their own learning, thinking, practice and development is expected of CoP trainees. Deep learning has been operationalised in a number of ways, along with how it can be achieved, and many of these draw upon concepts of levels of learning, and/or cycles of learning (e.g. Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1987; Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005). Much of the background research utilised undergraduate, further or secondary education students in various countries (e.g. Marton et al., 1984; Marton and Booth, 1997), as well as in business or management workers (e.g. Eraut, 1994; Argyris and Schon, 1996).

Korthagen and Vasalos (2010) looked in part at explicitly developing a trainee professional's reflective 'growth competence', for their future learning. However, they proposed tackling such developments in a complex way that invites an individual mentoring model of delivery that isn't feasible in my setting; also drawing upon

pseudo-psychotherapeutic frameworks such as the Diamond Approach (see Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005), whose underlying paradigm is a questionable fit with our post-graduate CoP training programme. Yet, they showed how *deeper* reflective learning can be possible.

Such literature begs the question of whether and to what extent ‘deep’ or ‘reflective’ academic learning *as it has been conceptualised for other settings and purposes*, is sufficiently ‘deep’ and get to the heart of reflective practice for CoP applied psychologists. Do trainees leave the course equipped for the demands of their future reflective practice, future reflective learning, and future reflective consultation and training roles? Would deeper work risk staff mission creep and role drift into problematic relational intensity with students, for example? The ‘depth’ of learning, and its attainment, raises important questions about what we are aiming at, how it might be achieved, and what is the appropriate ‘fit’ to the contexts, our roles and skills, and the demands upon our time, energy, resources and expertise, all of which impact upon curriculum design (e.g. Butcher et al., 2006). Below, I shall try to address some of these points.

Other educational principles are also salient. One challenge with reflective practice and meta-reflective learning is that it is not always open to reality testing. One cannot necessarily push a reflection or insight through a putative reflective experiential learning cycle (working with an understanding in a specific, somewhat rational empiricist, way). Insight and understanding don’t necessarily grow and develop only through experimentation and further reflection in action (e.g. see Bion, 1977). Revans’ (1971) theory of action (named the ‘science of praxeology’) speaks to the challenge of understanding and conceptualising iterative learning through reflective (and meta-reflective) experience. For Revans, Learning (L) is a function of questioning insight (Q) plus programmed knowledge (P), hence it relies less upon concrete ‘experience’ and empiricism. Thus, he prioritises insight and questioning rather than concrete experimentation, perhaps implicitly aligning with a psychoanalytical view of deep and transformational intra-psychic learning processes (e.g. Bion, 1977). On the other hand, Revans does emphasise that no learning (or completed insight) can take place without a move to *action*. However, as Coghlan (2012) persuasively emphasises, ‘deciding’ or ‘making a judgment’ (coming to know) is to be considered an ‘action’ in this domain. Coghlan, after Lonergan (1992), suggests that experience, understanding, and judgment come together to form insights and to transform received (programmed) knowledge into something one can learn and develop through in a deeply individual way. This is very relevant to CoP training and to meta-reflective growth competence.

A key education principle, then, is that of reframing and facilitating reflection, both implicitly and explicitly for students, as a process that centrally involves the action not only of experimentation for hypothesis testing, but also of *insight reworking*, and the action of reaching internal judgments, weighing up possibilities, and deciding upon

higher order insights that enter the 'texture of the mind' (see Cochlan, 2012). This is a different form of intra-psychic 'action' than experiential learning or reflection-in-action, and may be more helpful and relevant to psychological capability formation than, say, models of action learning in a business context. So far, Revan's useful ideas are not present in our CoP training, or informing its curriculum design.

## **Proposed Module**

In practice, then, the new Module will lead students beyond the standard combination of received wisdom (programmed knowledge) *about* reflective practice and invitations to keep reflective journals and use early life narratives, therapy and supervision. The module will offer a structured, facilitative, learning space with both teaching and (mainly) personally reflective exercises, within which insights can develop, transform, and become personally and professionally explicated and integrated into a meta-reflective awareness and hence growth competence (see 2.4.1. below), drawing where relevant on key theories such as Revans. This experience, then, students can take with them on qualification as an explicit resource, part of their meta-reflective growth competence. A challenge is to do this without requiring individualised mentoring. It will require the use of a range of learning approaches, including session teaching, structured home exercises, individual project work and writing, socially amplified feedback and peer feedback (including online), formative assessment both peer-based and tutor based, and revisiting reflective diarising habits. The intention would be to extend and consolidate reflective practice models and learning from the previous years, and then point explicitly to the differently contextualised demands of current and post-qualification reflexivity in trainees' developing practice.

Finally, it will be important to align of the various elements of the learning process: the teaching, learning outcomes, and assessment processes (see 2.4), to ensure an internally consistent and coherent curriculum experience for students (Biggs, 2003).

### *Module learning outcomes*

The module would run for the final stages of the third year. This module would have as its explicit aim the facilitation of students' reflective learning from their experience of the whole course, of ending the course, and of making their professional transition to being a qualified psychologist, *with particular reference to* developing and consolidating an authoritative meta-reflective practice capacity and resource as a counselling psychologist.

It should be noted that the learning outcomes would be operationalised from the perspective of an 'articulated curriculum' (Hussey and Smith, 2003), such that many value added and outcome- related benefits that are contiguous or incidental to the actual teaching are also included. For example, it may be helpful to have the module

students involved in delivering some content of the

1st and 2nd year reflective practice teaching, possibly alongside alumnus students, to really bring alive the developmental trajectories and embed the notion of meta-reflective growth competence in trainees' minds at all stages of their CoP developmental journey.

The overall learning aim would be for the students to go further than recognising what reflective practice is, and its function and value in their professional work, e.g. with individual clients. They would have a chance to explicitly evaluate the development of their own reflective capabilities over the three years, and to take note of limitations and consolidate upon understandings they reach and their peers share. The module may enable them to become more familiar with the inner 'action' of *their own* working with insights, by providing opportunities for deep questioning and evaluating of their own reflective processes, even as they undertake the experiential reflection on two or three prior years of CoP training, in the module.

#### *Learning and teaching strategy*

This learning will be facilitated by providing opportunities for students to work in class, through workshop and assignment-based exercises with socially amplified feedback and formative feedback (in class and online), to make it as real and personally experientially relevant as possible; learning from their own experience and the different perspectives and processes experienced by peers. In addition to retrospective reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action will be encouraged on the process of insight generation, understanding, judgment, and thus more intra-psychic learning and reflection tendencies. Thus students may gain a more direct and explicated sense of their own reflective style, tendencies, narratives, language, metaphors, and resources, and those of others. It is this that, it is proposed, may provide a sound platform for meta-reflective growth competence (as well as reflection-before-action perhaps) as they prepare to enter the profession soon themselves.

#### *Assessment strategy*

Much use will be made of formative and peer-based feedback in this module learning. To assist in formalising their learning and building confidence and accountability, summative assessment would also be expected from students. The task would be rather personal in nature, in relation to describing individualised learning and insight-judgment processes through reflection as well as experiential learning cycles; whilst both describing and utilising their own language, lexicon, imagery, and personality characteristics and moving away from a more academic style of theory-led critical writing. Marking such work will require careful guidance to ensure work still meets the standard of professionalism expected, but students feel free to take risks and try new things. Contributions to 1st and 2nd year lecturing, work in class, mini-project

work, and contributions to small group or pair work (e.g. online) could also be one component of the overall assessment.

One preparatory formative assessment would involve the gradual work up of a written, meta-self-reflective conceptualisation (as a personal reflective landscape, narrative domain, or psycho-system), of how they work with reflections and insights, with examples. This would be formulated slowly over a number of weeks, through a facilitated process. It could be shared at various stages of preparation with peers for perspective-taking, elaboration, and socially amplified peer feedback so as to further enhance the learning process. They would look, both individually and together, at how they have gone about the process of engagement - emotionally, intellectually, and intra-psychically - with the reflection work of the module so far, thus gaining in vivo practice in identifying insight judgment processes, and opportunities to see how they engage in reflection-in-action (if they do), and incidentally to help consolidate their learning. A further learning opportunity worth exploring is students to present at one or more 'reflective practice' lectures or non-class based events for the 1st or 2nd year cohort. This has the added advantage of helping to spread the learning from the 3rd year Module to less experienced trainees and increase both peer feedback and the sense of legitimate expertise and authority for 3rd year students. Finally, student contributions to feedback and reflection on ways in which the course could improve and change to better foster authoritative reflective practice by trainees, could be included in the assessment of students' contribution.

## Conclusion

This curriculum development initiative has identified and analysed a need for, and a response to, further questioning of: 'how can this CoP training course better foster authoritative meta-reflective practitioners who *know what that means?*'. It proposes engaging students at the closing stages of the course in a process that both reflects upon experience, and also extends meta-reflective learning and growth competence through providing *in vivo* opportunities to explore and build narratives, images, and metaphors, for intra- psychic insight-generation, understanding, and judgment processes relevant to learning - and looking at how they are actually doing that, as they do it. For example, by looking at **how** they go about their reflection-on-action, *in vivo*, within their own inner psycho-system of language, image, and landscape of meaningful references, they can become more aware of their own mechanism for how they reflect, work with insights, and reach judgments. This should help to build self-confident growth competence; an engine of growth and development.

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