POST QUALIFYING CONSORTIUM FOR SOCIAL WORK IN SCOTLAND

Support Materials in Relation to Assessment of Portfolio Submissions for Post Qualifying and Advanced Awards

Reflective Practice & Reflective Writing

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND REFLECTIVE WRITING

1   Introduction

This material is provided for those involved in work in relation to the Post Qualifying/ Advanced Award in Social Work. It will be of interest and relevance to candidates and potential candidates. It is also of relevance to supporters of candidates:

- as line managers
- as supervisors
- as workplace mentors
- as sources of general guidance and support in relation to the PQ framework, (eg staff in training/employee development roles)
- as providers of verification of practice competence in the form of focused references/
- testimonials/reports
- as providers of consultancy/tutoring such as within an agency-based structured support package focused on one or a group of specific PQ/AA requirements
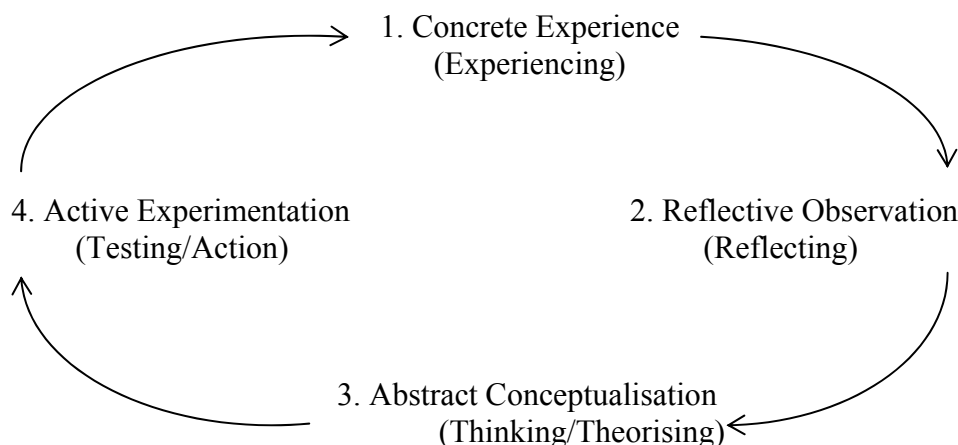
The Diploma in Social Work, and the Post Qualifying and Advanced Awards in Social Work aim to develop reflective practitioners in the context of outcome or competence based professional Social Work practice. Such practice involves areas of activity which are characterised by uncertainty and complex qualitative judgements. This is in contrast to pursuing a technical/procedural/administrative approach which is sometimes thought necessary to combat credibility problems for social service workers and agencies. Reflective practice enables access to the 'sense-making' processes of practitioners [Taylor & White, 2000]. Included within this paper are brief examples taken from portfolios assessed by the Post Qualifying Consortium for Social Work in Scotland during 2002, and extracted with the agreement of the candidates. These are printed in *italics* for clarity of presentation and are from PQ 1 Portfolios unless otherwise stated.

2   Exploration of the relevance of the concepts

Reflection is the process of giving meaning to experience, and uses complex reasoning processes to understand experiences:

- by making connections between this current experience and previous similar/related situations
- by considering the accumulated and synthesised knowledge base of the practitioner in relation to the context of the experience
- by exploring the understanding or rationale related to questions of why, what, how and by whom

Reflective Practice can be understood in theoretical terms as deriving from the work of Donald Schon, an educational theorist – 'reflection in action' [Schon 1983], and has developed through what is now usually termed the experiential learning process as described and represented diagrammatically by David Kolb [Kolb 1984]:

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                          ⟶  1. Concrete Experience  ⟍
                              (Experiencing)
      ⟋                                                    ⟍
4. Active Experimentation                      2. Reflective Observation
    (Testing/Action)                                (Reflecting)
      ⟍                                                    ⟋
                          3. Abstract Conceptualisation
                             (Thinking/Theorising)  ⟵
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The experience or event at Stage 1 becomes the basis of reflection at Stage 2. This leads on to generalising and conceptualising at Stage 3. At this point the experience may be seen as an isolated example or as part of a pattern and ideas, and theories may begin to form about what the pattern is. The hypothesis is then applied to further situations to test out its validity. If this is borne out, the 'lesson is learned' and is utilised in future situations resulting in more developed findings and so the cycle is repeated and the learning proceeds in a spiral. Thus individuals learn by retrieving what they know or have experienced, reflecting on this, linking these observations to new concepts or existing knowledge or new circumstances, before trying out the revised problem solving technique which provides further findings and so the spiral continues [Cameron, Coles 1994].

Recent developments have focused on the relevance of these concepts to Social Work education in particular and the development of courses designed and developed with reflective learning as their central principle [Gould & Taylor, 1996]. The view taken by the PQ Consortium for Social Work in Scotland is that these principles are also central to the continuing professional development of Social Workers and are embedded in both programme provision and programme or portfolio assessment at both PQ and AA levels.

Our view may be summed up in the concept of 'practising reflectivity' [Taylor & White 2000, page 6]:

> *"Practitioners also need to examine and become more explicit about the kinds of knowledge they use in their practice and how they apply these to make sense of events and situations they confront".*

Returning briefly to the process or cycle of experiential learning explained above it becomes clear that Stage 3 is the critical one – it is there that connections are made without which the experience would remain anecdotal. The quality of reflection is the critical variable in this analysis phase, as is the capacity to draw on formal knowledge, research and experience for the testing of Stage 4. The question then arises as to how or indeed if individuals can learn to

be reflective. Evidence from, and experience of Social Work education indicates that one can certainly develop and refine this capacity in oneself and in students and practitioners.

3   Reflective Writing

Reflective writing is the narrative mode of analysis of the processes outlined – it explores not only what the experience was, but considers the meaning the writer attached to it at the time and subsequently, and how this meaning is likely to influence action in the future. Thus reflective writing may contribute to continued professional development in a number of ways. The process of writing reflectively may in itself be an important step in an individual's attempt to make sense of her/his practice.

A range of terms are used in PQ/AA Programmes and by PQ Consortia in identifying elements of a portfolio:

- a reflective account or reflective commentary
- a critical account of practice, or critical incident analysis
- a Critical Career Review
- an evaluation of practice

The processes of reflection involved may also bring together various strands or themes in previous and present work practice and bring progress in understanding. In the context of the PQ/AA framework the key purpose of reflective writing is to demonstrate to, and provide evidence for, assessors of the reflective capacity to underpin the achievement of the PQ/AA requirements and therefore gain professional credits.

4   Methods of Assessment

The method used for assessment of PQ and Advanced Awards is usually in the form of a portfolio – a collection of materials which in the context of Social Work depicts a range of skills and competences and is a portable demonstration of the synthesis between knowledge, experience and interactional abilities, [Doel & Shardlow, 1995]. Thus within the portfolio, whatever the specific guidelines provided, candidates must evidence their practice and learning and use reflective writing to demonstrate explicitly their awareness of the processes involved (the response to 'how' and 'why' questions as well as 'what' questions).

Assessment focuses on General Descriptors at Scottish Degree Level 3 for the PQSW and at Masters Level for the AASW. These levels equate to academic level and academic credits are usually also awarded by accredited programmes, but are **not available** to those opting for portfolio assessment routes offered by a PQ Consortium.

Key components – the context, how the approach was selected, explanation of and reflection on the experience, the worker's individual contribution, and evaluation of effectiveness and learning - will need to be addressed whenever reference is made to particular pieces of direct work with services users, or practice situations, whether separately in sequence or by comparing and contrasting a number of situations simultaneously. The **context** needs to be set for the reader/assessor, (who was not part of the situation), by providing an overview of the agency and the candidate's role as well as more detailed contextual information about the

piece(s) of work. This will include explanation of relevant value/ethical dimensions and other challenges within the situation [Brodie et.al 1998].

Example 1:

"Within my own work setting, under the National Health Service and Community Care Act (1990), the local authority has a statutory responsibility to assess the community care needs of vulnerable adults. Additionally, the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act (1995), gives responsibility for the local authority to assess the needs of carers. As these are national legislation, each local authority has autonomy for interpretation, and creates a working practice to meet its statutory requirements. My local authority has produced a document – 'Assessment & Care Management Guidance', to advise practitioners carrying out community care assessments, of operational instructions and their responsibilities. This knowledge of procedures is fundamental to my practice. As a qualified Social Worker, I bring to the process a professional value base, skills and knowledge, which I attempt to continually develop and reflect upon".

This is a short example of how the context of the work may be explained, but the candidates own understanding and role is explicit. The next example shows an integrated, reflective approach to elaborating features of the context and their impact on practice.

Example 2:

"When I took up my present position I found the Project was under funded compared to similar projects in the local authority. We were seriously over budget. One of my first tasks was to review the service. I was instructed to take the Project back to the budgetary limits. At that stage it seemed as though the services offered were seriously in jeopardy. The Project seemed historically to have developed 'ad hoc' and I found it difficult to identify aims and objectives, or to find policies and procedures.

I used a Care Management approach to review each case. I carried out a thorough Community Care Assessment with each individual, agreed a plan of care, negotiated services and set up a review process. I recognised that I was transferring skills from my previous experience and my Social Work training to help me learn about my new responsibilities.

I was very aware of the pace of work. Although there was pressure to regularise the systems management of the Project, I was unwilling that this should be at the expense of establishing and building relationships with the staff, carers and service users. I was reminded of the guidance in Lishman (1994) who quotes Maluccio to suggest that:

'different qualities and skills may be required at different stages; warmth and sympathy initially, competence and knowledge later' (p9).

I employ a person-centred approach to my work………."

The next area to explore within the reflective written account is **how** the candidate selected her/his approach or strategy for dealing with the task – including elements of the knowledge base such as theoretical frameworks, practice models, the legal and policy context, and relevant research. This should include references to published sources. Using a PQ Part1 portfolio as an example, the PQ1 requirement focuses on demonstrating that candidates 'have improved and extended the level of competence since qualification' while the Core Requirements use terms such as 'using a relevant knowledge base, including an understanding of legal and policy contexts and appropriate research;'. Thus the reader/assessor of such a portfolio will expect to see explicit references showing updating of the knowledge base since qualification and specific sources relevant to the chosen piece(s) of work.

Example 3:

> "The themes I have picked out are also apparent in the process of my work with the two Disability Forums, which I shall call Forum A and Forum B for simplicity. Forum A requested Community Work assistance to tackle a membership crisis, brought about by illness, to some of the central members.
>
> Initially I spent some months working with the group to assess the techniques they had used to try to recruit new members and the problems they had experienced with retaining them. Having explored several options, the group tried forms of advertising and then organised a conference to draw in new people.
>
> The campaigning work of the Forum continued alongside these activities and it became increasingly apparent to me over time that I was being drawn into these activities as a form of tactical consultant and practical assistant. Whilst some degree of involvement in such campaigning may be essential in order to build a positive relationship with a group, in the long run it deflects from the essential community development task of assisting the group to develop its own campaigning capacity. Interestingly, Henderson and Thomas suggest that this is a common problem for community workers:
>
>> "It is the experience of many workers that, once committed to a line of action with existing groups, or even those in the process of formation, it becomes very difficult to draw back and start afresh", (Henderson and Thomas, 1980, pp40-41).
>
> Hence I have more recently begun to alter my form of intervention, spending less time with the core activists of the group and more time with those on the periphery and also indirectly contacting other related groups and individuals. This shift in focus has been reinforced by a growing recognition that the central activists of the group, whilst being effective campaigners in their own right, also have some degree of investment in their own situation of relative power which tends to militate against commitment to membership-building."

This example is again written in an integrated and reflective way and explicitly considers how the individual approach and contribution of the candidate to this community work practice developed and changed over time.

Example 4:

(From an Advanced Award portfolio, (AA2) candidate, responsible for a recruitment and selection project to make safer the selection of Social Work staff and carers who work with children):

> *"In my search for information on good practice in the area of staff selection I found the fields of occupational psychology and human resource management were extremely productive in offering critiques of different models. I read extensively at this point. Some of the texts I found useful were by Armstrong & Barrow (1998); Roberts (1997); Weightman (1998); Woodruffe (1993), all of whom had much to say about the competency approach to staff selection.*
>
> *The essential element of the approach is that thorough job analysis leads to a closer match between the abilities of the appointee and the demands of the job. Poor performance within the role is an important link with unsafe practice. While there are some people who come into Social Work with children, in order to abuse, there are many others who come into the service without this objective, but find themselves unable to fulfil all the requirements of the role. They may then become unsafe because of incompetence or ignorance.*
>
> *I was also able to make contact with an occupational psychologist in B……. who was extremely helpful in giving me ideas about how to go about building competency-based assessment into the selection process itself. She also put me in touch with the manager of human resources in a local authority in …….. which was then subject to the Waterhouse Inquiry (2000).*
>
> *That local authority had made vigorous efforts to improve its staff selection procedures, and have been willing to give me a great deal of information about how their processes work and how we might be able to adapt them for use."*

This candidate has adopted a very readable style, which nevertheless shows clearly what steps were taken, on what basis the piece of work progressed and includes up to date references.

The central component of the commentary/account will then **explain and reflect upon** the experience of undertaking the practice:

- including problems or dilemmas which arose and how the candidate dealt with them;
- her/his interactions/relationships with others in the process;
- what resources or materials (s)he used/adapted
- her/his professional and personal response to the process/experience.

Example 5:

> *"Robert's assessment was different and somewhat complex. Given my inexperience of autism, I was a little daunted by the task. I believe specialist experience and knowledge are essential to providing quality services, however, I also feel fresh and reflective approaches are important. As a relatively new Social Worker I feel inexperience and non-complacency leads me to naturally adopt a needs led approach to assessment. I do not necessarily know what resources exist and therefore, do not make the mistake of compiling service led assessments.*
>
> *A good example of this has been my assessment of Robert. With little knowledge specific to the autistic spectrum, I have accessed websites compiled by both the National Autism Society (NAS) and the Scottish Society for Autism. The websites have provided me with information on publications, research, services, news and current developments. I have met and listened to all key people who work with Robert – head teacher, class teachers, classroom assistants, residential supervisors and shift-working key workers.*
>
> *In addition, I met with previous community nurses and specialist advocacy workers. As with David, I needed to engage with these workers, respecting their knowledge and experience. Within the autistic spectrum, stereotypical accounts of behaviours often leads to fallacies, such as people who suffer from autism do not engage with others and prefer a solitary life style. Through liaison with different professionals, it was apparent Robert enjoys contact with his peers, and openly talks of other young people. I was determined to ascertain Robert's needs as opposed to the needs of a young person with autism – I believe this is an individualised approach.*
>
> *On reflection, Robert's assessment was incredibly challenging. Not only does Robert have serious communication difficulties, but also physical distance and limited contact restricted my engagement with him. I feel this is a good example that assessment must be a continuing process. With so many people giving their perspectives and opinions on Robert's needs, I was concerned that without adopting a person-centred approach, Robert would get lost in the process".*

In this example the candidate is exploring how his practice developed through this complex piece of work and how 'compare and contrast' techniques may be particularly relevant when demonstrating to the assessor the candidate's awareness and understanding of the process of her/his development

The narrative analysis of the intervention/process/experience should continue to be:

- informed by the wider body of knowledge and experience
- informed by specific models/frameworks deriving from recent research/policy frameworks employed in the agency/work context

Example 6:

> "Client C is a 51 year old woman. She is married and has a 12 year old daughter. She approached the Social Work Department to ask for support in dealing with social phobia and anxiety. Erikson (1995) reminds us that adults who suffer from anxiety are often exhibiting an underlying weakness of trust influenced by ambivalence about early attachments.
>
> Following psychosocial assessment I researched possible interventions which might be appropriate to this client. I considered that a cognitive approach would be appropriate.
>
> Dryden and Scott writing in Lishman (1998) describe the history of cognitive therapy and state that a traditional behavioural approach suggests that subjective processes such as thoughts and feelings do not exert a causal effect on behaviour. Cognitions, however, described as thoughts, images and attitudes (comprehension and understanding) are held to play an aetiological role in a variety of emotional disorders. Dryden and Scott describe how cognitive behaviour therapy focuses on both behaviour and cognition in the change process. They describe a range of similar behavioural approaches including Stress Inoculation Training (Meichenbaum 1985), Problem Solving Therapy (Nezu et al 1989) and Cognitive Therapy (Beck et al 1979).
>
> I chose to use the Cognitive Therapy approach (CT) developed by Beck et al and described by Will and Sanders (1979). CT is useful either in group settings or with individuals. It is appropriate in a variety of settings and has been efficacious in working with the symptoms and problems identified by client C. I am attracted to CT because as Dryden & Scott point out, it is an empowering intervention, teaching coping skills to the client, thereby building on her self esteem and self confidence that she can deal with problems. In this respect it upholds the principles of a person-centred approach, which is my preferred approach to clients. Dryden and Scot point out that CT should only be used based on the outcome of psychosocial assessment".

In this example the candidate is analysing the relevant knowledge base to explain why and how she came to adopt the particular approach with this client.

When setting out the processes in which (s)he engaged it is essential that (s)he spell out very clearly what **her/his own contribution** has been – many of the activities will have involved working alongside others, so it is crucial that the candidate makes her/his individual part of the process visible and explicit within the analysis, and that there is supporting testimony from others involved for verification purposes.

An important dimension of the commentary/account will be **evaluating,** or considering the effectiveness of the approach adopted in the selected piece(s) of work. This may be done by weighing up explicitly elements of 'success' and commenting on constraints, and then elaborating how the approach might have been changed or adapted to lead to an alternative outcome.

Example 7:

> *"Evaluation is the process for measuring the effectiveness of my practice, and whether desired outcomes from assessment and planning have been achieved. It is an opportunity to consider what has worked well, what needs to be changed, what I could have done differently and what I have learned from experience.*
>
> *When undertaking the role and responsibilities of a care manager, reviewing care plans is essential to the care management process. This procedure also acts as a method of evaluating my practice. For example to review is to re-assess if the care plan continues to meet the needs of the individual. Local policies 'Assessment and Care Management Practice Guidance' instruct me to carry out this task at least annually, and six weeks following a new care plan.*
>
> *I have used this formal reviewing system effectively to evaluate my practice. For David it enabled me and other professionals involved, to gauge whether the new support was working, and to ensure we were not creating a dependency. Importantly, it also gave David opportunities to express his feelings and experiences, and promoted his own participation in the process. For Ann, it highlighted her ability to learn further skills of independence, her desire to change work and how she was enjoying living away from home. Through evaluation, I can see multidisciplinary collaboration, respect for Ann's own participation have led to a greater understanding of Ann's self – a person centred approach."*

This example was selected particularly because it evidences the candidate's thought processes in reflecting on the effectiveness of his practice, and shows how local working practices and local policy have built this reflective/evaluative phase into the process of care management.

5   Supporting Evidence within the Portfolio

The reflective commentary/account will be accompanied within the portfolio by supporting evidence which may come from a wide variety of sources, and should wherever possible be:

- cross-referenced within the commentary
- focused specifically on the candidate's participation in the practice
- related to a specific PQ/AA requirement or the relevant core requirements
- confirmed as authentic by the candidate's line manager or appropriate colleague

The PQ/AA Programme on which the candidate is registered will provide guidelines, as does the Post Qualifying Consortium for Social Work in Scotland, in relation to portfolios being submitted to its assessment processes. In all cases these guidelines have been derived from the CCETSW, (now Scottish Social Services Council), frameworks and include:

- **insistence upon a direct observation of practice** element within supporting evidence
- **encouragement to include feedback/evidence from the service users** involved in the practice where possible/appropriate. Users are seen in this context as valuable sources of critical commentary on current practice [Youll & Walker, 1995]

6   Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the key concepts within the context of Continuing Professional Development for Social Workers, particularly in relation to achieving credits and awards at Post-Qualifying and Advanced levels within the CCETSW now Scottish Social Services Council frameworks. It also elaborates for candidates and their supporters the assessment strategy for the awards and should be used in conjunction with the specific guidelines from the Accredited Programme, or from the Post Qualifying Consortium for Social Work in Scotland, in relation to the portfolio assessment option. An exercise is provided at Appendix 1 to help candidates to focus on the essential processes and the examples selected show a range of approaches and styles which are 'fit for purpose' in this particular context.

APPENDIX 1

Starter Exercise

This exercise is designed to help you to begin to identify your capacity for reflective thinking and to convert it into the narrative mode of reflective writing:

1.   Identify one or two issues on which at the point of qualification you wanted to characterise your Social Work practice

2.   Make notes relating to your current practice about how you are demonstrating these selected characteristics of your Social Work competence.

3.   Record the effectiveness of these aspects of practice – some discussions in supervision about pieces of current work may spring to mind to help you consider/analyse:

   - What proved effective?
   - How was it effective?
   - What are your reasons for considering it effective?

4.   Record how your analysis/reflection at 3 may influence your future practice

You will now have the basis of a reflective statement on your identified characteristics and could take a similar approach in relation to the PQ/AA requirements you are seeking to claim.

APPENDIX 2

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