



Reflective Learning in Social Work Education

Minimol K

Department of Social Work, Vimala College, Thrissur, Kerala, India
minikjose@gmail.com

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Abstract

Reflective practice is a technique of studying one's own professional practice to improve knowledge, skills and attitude in the practice of social work. Integrating theory and practice deemed central to effective social work practice and guided reflection is an effective tool for professional development. In this paper, the author presents a framework that includes conceptual clarification of reflection and reflective practice, importance of reflective learning in social work education and various techniques of reflective learning.

Keywords: Social work, Reflective learning, Reflective Practice, Field Education.

Introduction

The concept reflective learning has gained increasing attention in various helping professions including social work. Reflective learning is a way of equipping anyone to step back from their experience, critically reflect on their learning and to formulate strategies to improve future performance. Reflection is thus presumed to have a significant role in experiential learning in social work. During social work training programme the students acquire knowledge by learning formal theories in class room. The students are exposed to knowledge about social work methods and interventions based on various theoretical approaches. However, important learning in social work course happens outside the classroom as a result of interaction with people during their field practicum. Field practicum provides students opportunities to apply these theories and begin to construct a body of informal knowledge or practice wisdom. Reflective learning is very critical in developing this experiential wisdom and practical skills. There are several techniques that could be applied in the reflective learning process. In this article the author tries to establish the importance of reflective learning in social work education, explain different theoretical perspectives and various techniques that could be administered.

Reflection- Meaning and theoretical perspectives

Boud, Keogh and Walker¹ defines reflection as a “generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations” (p.19). Reflection involves thinking about an experience using the skills of query and interrogation. Critical thinking and reflective practice have been used together to cross examine ideas, values and assumptions in order to incorporate them as a means of improving practice. Reflection is an essential process in integrating theoretical knowledge into practice².

Reflection enhances social worker's ability to question their thoughts and actions with a purpose to learn from them and to make changes to improve their actions³. Reflection before intervention could be viewed as planning or forethought.

There are two types of reflection—reflection on action and reflection in action⁴. Reflection on action is thinking back on something already done. It is not just thinking about practice but it is a process of transforming the experience into knowledge. In reflective learning, we use a ‘lense’ to make sense of what has happened and identifying the theories applied. It is a retrospective activity that evaluates the values, attitudes and feelings of the worker.

Thinking about actions while actually doing the action is called reflection in action. This is easier for experienced practitioners. It focuses in the use of implicit, intuitive knowledge and how this knowledge is refined by the professional during practice. As the name of this approach suggests, the practitioner is required to actively critique and develop their knowledge base while performing their duties.

Moon⁵ identifies a hierarchy of learning which is useful for enhancing their understanding of the reflective process. The hierarchy consists noticing, making sense, making meaning, working with meaning, and transformative learning. Noticing refers back to identifying an experience that begins the reflective process. We attempt to ‘make sense’ and make meaning by re-examining our behavior. Moon⁵ also states that this could be a process of thinking over things until they make better meaning. According to Moon⁵ the final stage of transformative learning is not something that all learners can achieve. Reflection is a contemplative process as well, as we need time to accommodate different ways of meaning, otherwise we risk not being able to make sense and advance our understanding⁶.

Boud and Walker¹ see experiential learning operating both within the class room as well as in the field. Boyd and Fales⁷, coming from an adult education and counselling perspective, see reflection as the key element in learning from experience in such a way that people are cognitively or affectively changed. Honey and Mumford⁸ classifies learners into four types-activists, reflectors, theorists, and pragmatists.

Reflective Practice

Jarvis⁹ states reflective practice as a form of practice that “seeks to problematise many situations of professional performance so that they can become potential learning situations and so the practitioners can continue to learn, grow and develop in and through practice”. Johns¹⁰ describes critical reflection as “a window through which the practitioner can view and focus self within the context of his/her own lived experience in ways that enable him/her to confront, understand and work towards resolving the contradictions within his/her practice between what is desirable and actual practice”. Reflective practice prepares the practitioners to feel responsible for their own learning. Reflective activities help practitioners to observe their experience in relation to their own feelings and those of others, so that they become more personally and socially aware, congruent and empathetic.

Importance of Reflective learning in Social work Education

Social work education focuses two kinds of reflection: reflection on self and reflection on practice. Reflection on self is very important in social work as social workers themselves are the instruments of the profession. “Conscious use of self is the term used by social workers to describe the skill of purposefully and intentionally using his or her motivation and capacity to communicate and interact with others in ways that facilitate change”¹¹. Social worker’s self becomes the medium through which the knowledge, skills and attitudes are conveyed to others¹². Self-reflection enhances social worker’s personal and professional skills and thus, increases professional development and competence^{13,14}. Social work education commonly requires the investigation of personal values and practices, as well as an examination of implications for how they relate to clinical practice in social work¹⁵.

Reflection on social work practice enhances integration of theory with practice, gain insight, develop knowledge and stimulate thorough learning. The ultimate aim of reflective learning is developing professional practice and improving services to service users and carers¹⁶. Reflection helps social workers to integrate theoretical learning into their practice. Theories include formal knowledge that students learn during the course eg. attachment theory, grief theory etc. and knowledge about how to practice interventions or methods eg. CBT, person centered therapy etc. However social workers also begin to construct a body of informal knowledge or experiential

wisdom. Reflection is vital to social work practice as it leads to better actions based on the reflection, which is known as reflective practice. Reflective learning should be facilitated during social work education and it is the key to continuing professional development. In reflective practice the practitioner recalls his/ her past experiences and obtains self explanation of those experiences. The practitioner makes an attempt to connect social work practice contexts with the professional knowledge¹⁷. This promotes evaluation of the workability of interventions and helps the social worker to modify the interventions next time¹⁸.

Students must acquire the ability to reflect on their thoughts, actions and implications. They should know how to transfer appropriate knowledge and skills from one context to another. Reflective learning creates innovation and creativity as opposed to programmed responses.

Techniques of reflective learning

The common techniques used for reflective learning are formal supervision sessions with social work educators, peer supervision, journal writing, and critical incident analysis. First and foremost requirement for reflective learning is a reflective space. The individual student or practitioner requires sufficient time for reflection after a particular experience. This is helpful to deal with the uncomfortable feelings, if any, arise after an experience¹⁷.

Supervision: Supervision is a forum for learning and that the main vehicle for learning is reflection. Yip¹⁷ lists the essential conditions for reflection as “social worker’s readiness and individual space to undergo self-reflection, supportive environment, and awareness of one’s limits”. The purpose of supervision is to facilitate supervisee’s learning and development and learning becomes transformational through reflection¹⁹. These are the two main principles of reflective learning model.

Learning journals

A learning log or journal is a personal record of student’s own learning. A Learning Log helps students to record their learning experiences and reflect upon their learning. This will help them to check their values and emotions which are ambiguous during the early months of their training. The journal provides accountability to student’s work and learning tasks and also promotes integration of class room learning into field work²⁰.

Critical Incident analysis

In critical incident analysis social worker chooses a significant event from his/her field work experience and analyzes and reflects on the incident for the purpose of learning. A critical incident is one which the worker believes or feels was crucial to, or had a significant effect upon the person as a social worker. It is a turning point or change in the way the worker normally

think or act. Eg. A piece of social work practice that went well or found challenging, or where recognized a mistake, or a work where there was conflict, hostility and aggression. The following are the essential contents of a critical incident reporting. i. An account of the incident- what, where, when, who, purpose, context. ii. Why was the incident critical?. iii. Initial response to the incident – thoughts, feelings, emotions and response of others involved in the incident. iv. Issues and dilemmas highlighted in the incident- values, dilemmas, implications on self and others/ agencies. v. Key learning- about worker himself/herself, relationship with others, social work practice(theories, skills, understanding of policies and procedures, future learning needs. vi. Outcomes- What difference will it made to the worker's practice, impact on the service user, changes occurred in the thinking, feeling and behavior of the worker.

Personal Development Plan (PDP)

The important presumption in social work practice is that social workers need to know themselves before they try to know and help other people. A personal Development Plan is a tool to help social workers to reflect upon their personal and professional development in a meaningful way. PDP focuses on contemplating available learning opportunities, what the students are learning, how are they learning, how successful the learning is etc. The two techniques that could be incorporated in this are Sutton²⁰ ASPIRE model (AS- Assessment, P-Planning, I- Intervention, RE- Review and Evaluation) and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis.

Learning partners

Reflection could be facilitated among students through peer support. Each student selects a learning partner companion with whom they share their learning experiences, thoughts and feelings attached to that experience. This purposeful interface is helpful to students especially when they engage in part time courses²¹.

Learning contracts

Learning contracts are another important tool for students to facilitate their reflection. In order to prepare the learning contract the students identify their learning objectives and match them with the learning opportunities available or could be created by the students in the agencies. Then the students will be able to assess their learning outcomes with reference to their plan in the beginning of the placement.

Self-Assessment Schedules

Students can be trained to prepare an assessment schedule for them to assess themselves in terms of their personal and professional growth as a result of the learning experiences in the class room and field. The students specify indicators to identify

their achievement of learning objectives. This gives them a feedback about advanced learning.

Essential conditions for reflective practice

There are certain essential conditions that facilitate reflective practice among social work students and practitioners. They should have a willingness to share elements of their practice and learn from what happens in practice regardless of its outcome. They should be motivated enough to 'replay' the practice situations and describe in detail particularly their thoughts, feelings and actions. A supervisor or a peer group that is supportive makes it easier for social work students to admit feelings of frailty, fear and personal vulnerability. A safe place in which the students can talk about their feelings without fear of repercussions is an essential condition for successful reflective learning. Under appropriate conditions, social workers' self-reflection can be very constructive, resulting in self-enhancement. However, under inappropriate conditions, social workers' self-reflection in reflective practice can be destructive and create problems for their professional and self-development. Social work educators should support students to find out appropriate mode of reflective practice which they are comfortable with as this will vary for each individual.

Conclusion

Reflective learning and reflective practice are increasingly featured in various disciplines. Reflective practice is very significant in social work education, practice and research. The scope of lifelong learning in social work is very broad and includes both formal and informal learning strategies. All the modes of reflective learning discussed in this article espouse in-depth analysis of social worker's practice experience. Reflective learning upholds transformative learning that cause change in the frame of reference of social workers.

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