

## Practice Reflection

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# The Development of a Theory to Practice Session for Students

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### ABSTRACT

Social work students frequently report challenges in merging their university learning with their placement experiences. A joint approach was implemented across three different NSW Health sites to provide students with models that enable them to integrate their academic learning with their placement experiences. In a one-off, two-hour group session, students were exposed to frameworks that experienced social workers reported assisted them to link theory with practice. Evaluations showed that, after the session, students had an increased understanding of the role of theory in social work practice and were more able to incorporate it into their practice. The theory to practice session gave students tools and language to speak about theory with other professionals.

**Keywords:** *Theory and practice integration, Field placement, Student supervision*

## BACKGROUND

The authors were employed as Social work student educators in separate hospitals in Sydney. Their role encompassed direct and indirect student supervision, and mentoring and supporting field work supervisors. Despite being experienced in social work practice and in field supervision they felt challenged by helping students relate their theoretical knowledge to the placement setting. It was the authors' observation and experience that field educators often struggled with this aspect of placement, reporting a lack of confidence in teaching social work theory to a student.

The authors were keen to help their placement students, and their field supervisors, more easily understand and articulate the relationship between theory and practice. The authors always had students from multiple universities on placement at the same time, and noted that this was a universal challenge.

### Description of Session Content

A two-hour teaching interactive session was developed to fit with the demands on the student educators and students. The session was run early in the placement with a mix of first and second placement social work students. Students came from different universities and hospitals, so the session started with an *icebreaker* exercise employing conversation building card sets. Students and presenters chose one card from the set to represent their feelings about their ability to link theory (university learning) to practice (placement experience) at this point in time. Students discussed their card selection and often disclosed a discomfort using theory. The presenters described their initial struggles with understanding theory but conveyed that this has been overcome.

The following segment, called "What is a Theory?" centred on the Cleak and Wilson (2007, p.99) explanation that "theories attempt to bring together a range of explanations that may have a bearing on the strategies or interventions that are chosen." Students broke into pairs to discuss why they think theory is important for social workers. Feedback to the larger group included "it gives the profession credibility" and "it helps us to know what to do."

Finally, students brainstormed theories they knew and these were written on a whiteboard. The brainstorm acknowledged how many social work theories exist, and underscored how many of these the students already knew. The presenters encouraged discussion about the differences between theories, models and therapies and acknowledged the confusion and difficulties in understanding the differences.

The three presenters then described their favoured frameworks to the students.

1. First discussed was the "Head Heart Hands" framework that was developed for a hospital social work new graduate training programme (Maxwell, c.1997, unpublished), and used since then at the hospital. The use of visual and tactile stimuli during this time resulted in each student creating a head, heart and hands which enhanced the learning and memory of the session. This framework is a way of conceptualising and categorising theories that students know. The head relates to intellectual theories or knowledge, for example, systems theory and crisis intervention. The heart relates to the students'

personal philosophies such as feminist and anti-oppressive theories, while the hands are more practical – relating to what the theory might guide you to do, such as advocacy. The students are given some activity time to populate their sheets from the theories written on the board. The students take away a physical reminder of the session which aids as a memory prompt for later in their placement.

2. The next framework was “The Theory Circle” or “Kit” model (Collingwood, Emond, & Woodward, 2007) which presents “The Three-Stage Theory Framework.” A practice example was given to show how Kit can be applied easily and effectively to create an understanding of the theories used in the practice setting. Following the case presentation, students were split into small groups to discuss their own case examples, populating the Theory Circle framework. Learnings were shared in a subsequent large group discussion.
3. The third framework called “Integrating Theory to Practice” (Bradey, Studdy, & Hillman, 2004) was then described. This presents a “what, where, how and why” approach to analysing social work theories. This integration model recognises the need to use more than one social work theory in one’s practice and invites the user to break down theories into their parts and hence work out what are the particular qualities of social work theories being used. Within the framework are specific questions for students to answer, and a practice example is given for them to take away.

The session ended with a discussion about how the students may use either one or a combination of the frameworks to understand the link between theory and practice. Students were encouraged to discuss the session with their field educator, mindful that encouraging such dialogue can assist with deep learning (Clare, 2007). The students were requested to use the Kit model with their next client/project, so that they can use it in a prospective rather than retrospective way. Copies of the session content and articles were provided to field educators to ensure they had a common language to discuss theoretical concepts with their students.

## **STUDENT FEEDBACK**

It was decided to undertake a quality improvement activity to determine whether the students’ needs were being met by our group. Approval for evaluation of the student program, including asking students to complete anonymous self-report surveys, was provided by the Children’s Hospital at Westmead under their quality improvement processes; it was noted by the clinical governance staff that the ethical implications were minimal.

After the early sessions, students completed a post-session evaluation form, in later sessions, a pre- and a post-self-report rating questionnaire were added. The pre-session forms were completed and handed to the presenters after the icebreaker, post-session handouts were mailed to the facilitators. All feedback was anonymous. Students were aware that the feedback would be used for quality improvement purposes.

A total of 47 students contributed to the data collected, representing five sessions over a period of 18 months. The majority of students provided a very positive rating for the

session with no rating below five out of 10. A total of 44 of the 47 students reported that they would continue with one of the models with comments particularly highlighting their interest in applying Collingwood's model, with one student citing the usefulness of "breaking down cases to think about what informs your practice as well as what you will use to intervene."

A majority, 43 of the 47 students, stated that they thought this session would "help them to link their university learning to their placement tasks" or that it would "help them more clearly articulate the theory they are using in their placement tasks." Comments included "provides opportunities for a deeper thinking about what I'm doing" and "building a base of where to go." Qualitative session evaluation feedback was also positive, with one comment noting, "It's not overwhelming when broken down."

## **DISCUSSION**

The evaluations showed a positive shift in the self-reported ability of students to link theory to the practice setting. Although the authors see it as unlikely that any change in understanding is due solely to the session, they consider that the session positively contributed to providing the students with a framework and tools to link between their learning at university and the practice environment.

Of concern was the pre-session data that clearly showed many students were not able to identify a framework to assist them link theory and practice. Field educators are frequently some years removed from the academic world and would benefit from students coming to placement with a framework that could be developed during the placement. Given the increasing number of social work students undertaking placements where there is no social worker on site, it seems even more important to address this.

Of equal importance is the need to support field educators to model the essential role of theory during their day-to-day work. Universities offer, for field educators, education sessions where theory is discussed. The authors strongly recommend field educators attend these sessions. Modelling by field educators will assist students to understand the relevance of theory to what they observe and do on placement, as well as improving their capacity to articulate the theoretical models and approaches they are applying to their daily practice.

## **REFLECTION**

The authors engaged in ongoing reflection in building the theory to practice sessions, leading to changes in format and message. Over time, it became clear that the frameworks presented were not as separate as they had seemed and they complemented each other in ways that were not obvious at first. As a result, the sessions have developed more of a flow from one model to the next, with the "Head Heart Hands" model (Maxwell, c.1997) fitting neatly with the "Knowledge, Values and Skills" of the Kit model (Collingwood, 2007), and the "Integration" model (Studdy et al., 1991) being used after the session by the students to further their understanding of particular theories.

Over time, the authors strengthened their view that the theory to practice session should not be seen as one-off learning sessions. Ongoing learning in this area is vital. The following changes were introduced:

- The post-session evaluation is not just a tool for quality improvement as it forms part of the reflective process two weeks after the session.
- An abbreviated version of the session was presented to the students' field educators who were encouraged to discuss this in supervision.
- The students were asked to produce a Kit example of one of their cases and/or a summary of a theory based on the "Integration" model later in the placement to show evidence of consolidation of their learning. Students were encouraged to show these to their university field liaison people at mid-placement or end-of-placement visits.

The authors acknowledge the struggle of practicing social workers to undertake formal research. For this reason the inception of the pre- and post-session data-collection lacked rigour. However, the authors considered it important to offer a description of the session as it has the potential to assist other practitioners who struggle with both time and the theory to practice connection. The authors acknowledge that changes made to the session, combined with the increased confidence with which the sessions were presented over time may have had some effect on the students' evaluation scores. It would be helpful to the field if others were to replicate our process using a stronger evaluation framework.

## **ADDENDUM**

This quality improvement project was undertaken several years ago, the initial findings were presented at an AASWWE Symposium in 2011 and the draft of this article was written following the evaluation process. It has been interesting to come back several years later and revisit it.

The session has continued to be used in the paediatric setting since this time, the other authors moving to different work. While formal evaluations have not been undertaken recently, the structure used for the group remains the same and verbal feedback from students is very positive. It is with sadness that we note that the struggles for students in linking theory to practice do not seem to have changed. It would be interesting, though impossible for us to implement, to follow up some of these students in the longer term and see whether they continue to apply the models taught to them during this session as they continue in their social work careers.

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