Practice Teaching in the Probation Service – A Shared Learning Experience

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Summary: Practice placements as part of Social Work programmes are intrinsic to the student's education and training, as without the practice placement students cannot qualify as social workers. Practice teachers, therefore, play a key role in assisting students as they embark on the practice element of their journey to becoming qualified social workers. Social workers operating within the criminal justice system have been guiding social work students for many years on their voyage. As well as meeting the needs of universities' practice, placements afford Probation Officers an opportunity to support students' growth and learning. This paper defines and examines the multiple roles of the practice teacher and explores how an understanding of students' learning styles as well as their own can assist with those roles. It looks at the challenges that practice teachers and students may face on placement and how supervision can be used to help address those challenges. The paper considers the relating of theory to practice and the significance of reflective practice within students' learning.

Keywords: Social work training, CORU, Probation Service, probation officers, probation, placements, supervision, practice teaching, skills development, training, learning.

Introduction

> The quality of our learning is intrinsically linked to our capacity and wiliness to learn together. Valuable learning is a shared learning experience. (Horder and Gossman, 2010; cited in Haslett and Rowlands, 2010).

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Social work courses in Irish universities, which include the Master's degree in Social Work (MSW) and the Bachelor's degree in Social Work (BSW), are full-time courses that combine academic study with fieldwork placements. These courses are monitored for suitability and approved by the Social Workers Registration Board on behalf of The Health and Social Care Professional Council (CORU).[1] Registration Board approval means that a programme has met the required standards in education, training, assessment, examinations and practice education.

According to The Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Social Workers (2011), 'if you (the practice teacher) are responsible for teaching and assessing social work students you must do so fairly and respectfully and on the basis of agreed criteria'. The practice teacher has the responsibility of teaching students about social work practice and plays a leading role in overseeing and assessing that students are competent to practise in accordance with this code.

Students in years one and two of the MSW and in years three and four of the BSW complete two placements. The Probation Service has a well-established record in the provision of practice placements, with up to 50 placements provided on an annual basis.

In the author's experience, some students have had little or no experience of working with a client group in the criminal justice system and some are unclear about the role and function of a Probation Officer. The Probation of Offenders Act 1907 provides for the statutory supervision of offenders in the community and is the underpinning legislation for probation work in Ireland.

The Probation Service's role is to contribute to public safety by:

- the management of community sanctions and measures
- the effective assessment and management of offenders
- facilitating the integration of ex-offenders (Probation Service Strategy Statement 2012–2014).

England (1998; cited in Lawson, 1998) states that the practice teacher must define and mediate social work for their students. 'Their position is a measure of the worth of practices in social work and their reflections a

[1] The Health and Social Care Professionals Council is the regulatory authority established in 2007 with responsibility for 12 named health and social care professions. Each profession is regulated by a Registration Board. Visit www.coru.ie for more information.

unique channel for social work to describe and understand its practice' (p. 9). Clarity of role definition and the practice teacher's guidance with interventions enables students to work as effective change agents in contributing to the goal of reduced recidivism.

Roles of the practice teacher

Practice teachers have various roles: as teacher, practitioner, supervisor, mentor and evaluator. While these roles often combine, their management and consolidation can be something of a juggling act.

Regarding the role of *teacher*, Thompson *et al.* (1990) say that the title of practice teacher implies 'teacher' in the work place rather than in the educational setting. They further state that social work education is not just about learning technical skills; it involves developing values, beliefs, ideologies and anti-discriminatory practice. Students need to learn what social work practice is. They can arrive on placement in the Probation Service unfamiliar with the work done with clients on probation. Role clarification, therefore, is essential at the beginning of the student's placement and throughout.

In the first two weeks of the placement a formal induction should take place introducing the student to the agency, the courts and other relevant stakeholders. This will enable the student to observe the practice teacher and their colleagues at work. It is an opportunity for the student to become familiar with the specific functions of the team and to understand how those functions fit with the overall goals of the organisation. It is useful for the student to have an induction information pack providing information on the ethos of the organisation and the strategies and policies that will guide the student's practice.

The practice teacher within the Probation Service is a *practitioner* with a case load. Students can arrive on placement armed with theory that they have to integrate into their practice to develop the necessary skills. Learning how to effectively practise can be a huge task for students, who rely on the practice teacher to support them in application of theory to practice.

Trevithick (2005) says that 'the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well being' (p. 1). In the Probation Service we are intervening with clients to promote and support desistance from crime. This is a challenging task and can be overwhelming for students as they translate theory to practice.

The practice teacher, as *supervisor,* monitors and supports the student's learning and progress. The practice placement provides a forum for students to grow and to show their capabilities as well as identifying skills, knowledge and values that need to be developed. This can be achieved through the practice teacher setting tasks requiring clear deliverables for students. Placements within the Probation Service are usually well structured, with defined pieces of work to be completed within specific time frames. This includes the completion of court-mandated Pre-sentence Reports. Constructive feedback on the student's performance should be encouraged, with clear direction on how the student can improve their work.

A practice teacher is also a *mentor*. This involves offering the student advice and support and having a special interest in helping the student's professional development. The mentoring relationship is based on mutual respect, trust, understanding and empathy. The practice teacher needs to consider that the student may be nervous or lacking in confidence. In the author's experience students have opinions, prejudices and fears and they should be encouraged to 'name' these issues so that they can be addressed. For example, a student may have negative views about people who use drugs. They may need mentoring to develop the confidence and competence to work effectively with a client who has an addiction to heroin.

The practice teacher should be mindful that students can be reticent in asking questions of the practice teacher or other team members in the early stages of placement. The established history of engagement with students has led to the growth of a strong student-focused culture within Probation Service teams. Careful listening to the student will lead to increased understanding, convey empathy and promote trust in the working relationship.

A practice teacher is also an *evaluator*. Lawson (1998) says that the practice teacher holds the authority to assess if the student has reached a level of competence with regard to knowledge, values and skills. All students review learning incidents (Chambers *et al.*, 2003) throughout their placement.

In line with the standards developed by the Social Workers Registration Board, students are required to be competent in the following six proficiencies: professional autonomy and accountability; interpersonal and professional relationships; effective communication; personal and professional development; provision of quality services; and

knowledge, understanding and skills. 'The standards of proficiency are the threshold standards required for the safe and appropriate practice of the profession in Ireland. They are the knowledge, skills, competencies and professional attributes for the safe practising of the profession' (www.coru.ie).

Knott and Scragg (2007) comment that, in evaluating a student's work, the practice teacher needs to have evidence that supports their evaluation. The student needs to demonstrate what they have learned, how this is evidence of their learning process and how they apply core skills and knowledge in practice.

Students are required to review learning incidents (Chambers *et al.*, 2003) highlighting knowledge, skills, values and theory. The practice teacher provides feedback on the learning incidents. It is important for the student's learning that the practice teacher achieves a balance between affirmation and being a critical friend. In the author's experience as a practice teacher, this can be difficult at times. An excessive focus on affirmation and encouragement with the student, without clarification on how to improve practice, can hinder the learning process. Constructive criticism is essential in order for the student's learning to progress.

Understanding students' learning styles

When supervising students, it can be of benefit that the practice teacher understands their own learning process and learning style as well as that of the students. Hanley (1982; cited in Munson, 2002) comments that the practice teacher and student must be aware of their individual learning styles. Munson (2002) says that social work practice can be viewed as an art that combines professionally mastered knowledge and chosen values with the individual attributes and styles of the practitioner. Barriers to learning can be removed by understanding the principles of how adults learn.

According to Kolb's (1984) learning process, there are four stages in the cycle of learning: concrete experience, abstract conceptualism, active experimentation and reflective observation.

Concrete experience: In this stage the learner relies on learning from feelings and from specific experiences. Students with this learning style are open minded and adaptable to change. While they may have little knowledge of working with clients on probation, they will use their skills

from past experiences of working with people to assist them. In the author's experience, students with this learning style also need to balance their experiential learning with strategic planning to help keep them focused on the tasks at hand.

Reflective observation: In this stage the learner likes to understand things before they act. They learn by watching and listening before making judgements. In the author's experience, students with this learning style like to observe how the practice teacher works but they need to develop their own style of working, which will only emerge through supervised practice.

Abstract conceptualisation: This stage of learning involves learning by thinking, using systemic planning and logic rather than feelings to understand problems or situations. In the author's experience, students with this learning style like to collect as much information as possible on the client before meeting them, and strategically plan their interviews. Students may need encouragement to enact the plan and, once the pace of the placement increases, support will be required in managing the planning within particular time constraints.

Active experimentation: In this stage the learner likes to learn by doing and experimenting with different ways of carrying out work. Students with this learning style are active learners and are eager to complete the task. Students can act precipitously without fully processing a situation, and therefore need to slow down and conceptualise situations before acting.

Kolb (1984) says that there are four styles of learning that individuals can be divided into: converger, diverger, assimilator, accommodator.

The *converger* style of learner displays learning characteristics of abstract conceptualism combined with active experimentation (doing and thinking). They are strong in applying practical ideas and they like to understand how things work in practice. However, their thinking can be narrow and their careful thinking may make them slower to act in situations.

Divergers display learning characteristics of concrete experience and reflective observation (feeling and watching). They have good imaginative ability. They are good at generating ideas and seeing things from different perspectives. However, at times they need to step back and think things through before acting.

Assimilators display learning characteristics of abstract conceptualisation and reflective observation (watching and thinking). These learners

have a strong ability to create theoretical models. They are concerned with abstract concepts rather than people. This type of leaner requires good clear explanations and they like to have the time to think things through.

*Accommodator*s' learning is characterised by concrete experience and active experimentation (doing and feeling). Their greatest strength is getting things done and they like new challenges and experiences. However, they can be more of a risk-taker. This type of learner likes to solve problems intuitively and prefers to work in teams to complete tasks.

It may be helpful to practice teachers if they examine their own learning inventory and get the student to do the same. Kolb states that the inventory will help people understand how they solve problems, how they set goals, how they manage others and how they deal with new situations. If the practice teacher and the student know what type of learners they are it can make the working relationship more understandable.

Student supervision

Supervisors should give students space to voice their concerns regarding their progress. Structured supervision sessions can provide a safe environment to do this. Hawkins and Shohet (2000) say that supervision provides a chance to stand back and reflect; it is an opportunity to engage in the search for new options, to discover the learning that often emerges from the most difficult situations. Supervision with the student is, therefore, an essential part of practice teaching.

In the author's experience, some students may be unclear about the role of supervision. The reasons and functions should be explained. Butler and Elliot (1985), as cited in Thompson *et al.* (1990), state that the key principles of supervision with the student are to assess and evaluate the students' learning needs and their ability to practise. Supervision also informs the students' practice and stretches their creative and critical abilities. It consciously integrates the students' theoretical learning with social work practice and enhances their knowledge and understanding of wider social work issues and values.

Students should have an opportunity to ask questions throughout their placement. Supervision sessions should allow time for issues to be explored in detail. It can be helpful for the student, in the first supervision, to write down their hopes and concerns and discuss them.

At the end of the placement the students can revisit these. Students have commented that they found it a very helpful way of clarifying their concerns. They also described how the exercise helped them recognise how far they had progressed in fulfilling their goals and dealing with their concerns.

Page and Wosket (1994) say that a model of supervision needs to be humanised in order for it to be applied with care, flexibility and sensitivity. If this does not happen the practitioner operates as a technician and the student may feel devalued; they may feel like an object.

Page and Wosket (1994) identify five stages in supervision: contract, focus, space, bridge and review. The *contract* should be a framework for beginning the supervision relationship. It does not have to be written down. A contract should have ground rules such as agenda, time, location, frequency, a code of ethics. The time and meeting place for supervision should be arranged in advance.

The second stage of supervision is *focus*. The practice teacher may have set the student a task for the session, such as to read an article for discussion. Page and Wosket (1994) say this helps to create a balance between the practice teacher and the student, as both can contribute to the task. Focus encourages the practice teacher and the student to prepare for the session in advance. The student will have to complete supervision logs. Both the student and the practice teacher need to identity what they have to do for the next session, thereby setting the focus for that session.

The third stage is *space*. The student should be helped, supported, challenged and affirmed. The practice teacher is a role model for the student. Sennett (cited in Munson, 2002) states that when the practice teacher embarks on the supervisory process, they should never attempt to direct the work of others when they are not good at doing that work themselves. The practice teacher has expertise that they share with the student. The student will need to be given the space and the support to make sense of the practice environment.

Stage four is *bridge*. This is the linkage between the work in supervision and its application in the task context. Part of this process is information-giving. For example, the practice teacher may give the student information on a Probation Service policy. In this stage the practice teacher is exploring with the student the information they have received and how they apply it in practice. It is an opportunity to explore

suggestions for how the student can evolve and progress their practice. Supervision is a chance to explore goals and workloads, to see if the goals are realistic and how the student is managing their workload.

Stage five is *review*. Feedback is important in order to improve the usefulness of supervision. Page and Wosket (1994) say that feedback should be a two-way process. The supervisor gives a response and feedback on the student's work. Feedback is also a chance for the student to look at their strengths and weakness in a constructive way. The student should also have an opportunity to give feedback to the practice teacher.

Relating theory to practice

In the author's experience, students enter into the practice environment armed with theory. One of the challenges they face on placement is relating that theory to practice. Dempsey *et al.* (2001) state that when students are taught confidence and competence they also need to have flexibility to grow, change and learn as their roles are being redefined. It is a challenge for students to integrate theory with practical experience, as some students may not have as much work experience as others.

Brown and Rutter (2008) state that it is important that the practice teacher show students how to apply knowledge in practice, in specific situations: for example, how motivational interviewing can be used to encourage a shift in thinking towards a prosocial lifestyle, or how a task-centred approach can be used to set specific goals such as completing an offending behaviour programme or finding a course or a job.

Dempsey *et al.* (2001) say that at college, students participate in skills laboratories. The skills laboratory experience aims to equip students to develop an understanding of professional knowledge, which is primarily developed through practice, and to analyse their experiences in a safe environment. The skills laboratory enables students' prior life experiences to be incorporated in the new learning situation in the classroom and placement.

Relating theory to practice can also cause anxiety to the practice teacher, particularly if it has been some time since they have studied social work theory. Walker *et al.* (1995; cited in Lawson, 1998) state that the practice teacher will be at a high level of learning and 'unconsciously competent'. The theories and methods that were once consciously applied are now an integral part of their knowledge base and are used intuitively, based on their wisdom of practice.

In a busy work environment, reviewing theoretical frameworks may become less of a priority. Supervising a student provides the practice teacher with an opportunity to revisit the theories and methods informing their interventions, and to stay abreast of developments in research and evidence-based practice.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice has become more widely used in social work training over recent years. In the author's experience, the concept of reflective practice can be difficult for students to understand. Beddoe (2000; cited in Cleak and Wilson, 2007, p. 49) states that 'initiatives in field education have encouraged a shift away from both apprenticeship and therapeutic approaches towards reflective and facultative teaching'.

Knott and Scragg (2007, p. 104) advise that 'reflective practice on placement is a critical and analytic tool. It can be used in helping to integrate theoretical learning, gain insight, transfer knowledge and promote learning in depth.' They say that practice teachers should not initially question the student about their abilities as a reflective practitioner. The student may be hesitant and apprehensive when asked to relate theory to practice on placement. Practice teachers need to look at how they can effectively work with the students to encourage and develop reflective practice.

According to Schön (1983), people reflect on their work when there is something puzzling, annoying or interesting that they wish to understand. This process is significant for students during placements when they handle situations characterised by uncertainty, instability and value conflicts. Schön states that there are two important aspects of the reflection process: *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action*. *Reflection-on-action* occurs when the student reflects on their practice after an event; for example, an interview with a client. *Reflection-in-action* refers to thinking on your feet, adopting a creative approach to practice by thinking about your practice while the event is happening; for example, analysis of a client interview while it is happening and steering it.

Some students may not be aware that they use *reflection-in-action* until it is pointed out. For example, a student phones a client to make an appointment for the client to meet and the client discloses that he has

reoffended. What is intended to be a straightforward phone call transpires to be a challenging call where the student has to think on their feet, use crisis intervention and reflect on what they are saying, while the conversation is in action. Dewey (1933) described reflective learning as something that is active and persistent. He states that it is also the careful consideration of any belief or form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it.

Bloom (2007) carried out a study on Swedish social work students' use of knowledge during their placements. Students were asked to write a brief account about a situation that happened on placement that was critical or problematic. These reflections were analysed. The results showed that students on placement used several forms of knowledge, including fact-based. The study also showed that students can adapt their knowledge to varying critical situations. Bloom stated that less than half the knowledge (personal experiences and theory) that social work students used in a critical situation was acquired before the placement started. This implies that more than half the knowledge is acquired during the placement. For Bloom this is an indication of how important field work practice is for students.

Reflective practice allows us to tap into our prejudices. Students can, for example, have preconceived ideas about what Probation Service clients look like. Working with clients in the Probation Service has its challenges, as they may be from marginalised communities and have committed crimes involving victims and the community. This may challenge students' preconceived ideas and prejudices. Therefore, understanding the ethos of anti-oppressive practice is essential to working with the Probation Service client group. Ward *et al.* (2002) state that the Human Rights Act 1998 (UK) has many potential implications for probation training. Students on placement may be more sensitive to human rights as they have had more space and opportunity to debate issues in college than colleagues in the workplace.

To assist the student with reflection, Knott and Scragg (2007) say that the student should use the simile of a mirror. A mirror can reflect back to us what is going on in difficult situations. It is possible, in their view, to extend the simile to incorporate anti-oppressive perspective in practice by tilting the mirror at an angle, so that things can be seen from a different perspective. This technique can assist the student to explore and gain insight into service users' circumstances and lives.

Meeting challenges on probation placements

Common themes have emerged regarding the challenges the students face in a social work training placement in the Probation Service. These include working in a structured environment; coping with authority, particularly in the courts; managing authority and responsibility; and balancing care and control in the breaching and enforcing of Court Orders.

Work in the Probation Service is structured and systematic. It requires good work planning and meeting of deadlines, for example for court reports. The work can be task-oriented as in completing reports, record keeping, diary planning and prioritising work. Students may find this difficult and feel a lack of freedom to experiment with the role.

In the author's experience, students have commented on the power imbalance between clients and the courts. Some have described this distinction in roles as difficult to comprehend. Students can feel disempowered, viewing the authority of judges in practice in sentencing as in conflict with their personal views.

Students have commented that there is also a power imbalance between the client and the Probation Officer. Probation Officers have a caring role, but they also have to challenge clients' actions and behaviour. Students can find the balancing of care and control difficult to manage. This makes role clarification very important. Trotter (2006) states that the client, at the beginning of the working relationship, should be made aware of the worker's role, and that role clarification should continue throughout the work. The client should be made aware that the worker is there to support them and work with them to achieve their goals while on probation.

Clients also need to be made aware that probation supervision is a Court Order and that they are expected to fulfil the conditions of their Order; for example, not to offend, to attend for appointment, to engage in and co-operate with treatment, to engage in training and to seek employment. When a client misses an appointment the student should be advised by the practice teacher to challenge the client's behaviour. Students can be very nervous about challenging a client's behaviour and taking a more controlling role. It can be difficult to balance responsibilities, as their personal ethos and intent can be primarily care-focused.

In addressing the care versus control dilemma, students can find the concept and practice of breaching of Orders and return to court process

hard to manage. A Probation Order is a Court Order. If the client hasn't adhered to a condition they have broken the Court Order and are accountable to the Court. Ward *et al.* (2002) say that breaching conveys important information to clients and judges; that the Probation Service is reliable in supervising clients effectively and enforcing the law. Compliance policies and practice and breach proceedings should be clearly explained to the student. It is helpful for the student's learning to observe Probation Officers carrying out breach proceedings in court.

All these challenges can be difficult for the student to manage and can cause anxiety. Grossbard (1954) encourages practice teachers to assist students to manage their anxiety. Frantz (1992, p. 29) states that tension is managed well when 'a person consciously experiences and reflects upon it, discerns its location and parameters, welcomes it as a message and gleans from it information useful in choosing a response to the anxiety arousing circumstances'.

As practice teachers it can be difficult to watch a student experience anxiety. Moffat and Miehls (1999) state that it is necessary for the student to experience anxiety in order for them to develop an identity that is sensitive to the experiences of the others. The student is gaining knowledge of the influence they have on others through their interpersonal relations.

Conclusion

Students bring theories and skills learned in university to the practice environment, where, with the assistance of the practice teacher, they develop and apply their practical social work skills. Practice teachers are learning from students, as it is an opportunity for them to be updated on theories and to review and reflect on their own practice.

Students are enthusiastic about leaning in the practice environment. While the placement in the Probation Service may be challenging, the opportunity for learning is huge. As well as developing practical skills such as report writing, assessment and case management, students are honing their communication and engagement skills and learning to manage authority.

Practice teachers have an important role in training and educating future social workers. Understanding how students learn gives the practice teacher an insight into how the student develops practice. The practice teacher has many roles. When this juggling act is well balanced

and managed, the experience can be empowering, rewarding, fruitful, insightful and valuable to the student and the practice teacher.

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