

INSIDER INQUIRY: DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP BASED PRACTICE WHEN TEACHING SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper aims to introduce my research inquiry; developing a relationship based practice when teaching social work students. As a Senior Lecturer in Social Work undertaking a Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice, my choice of inquiry is situated in my everyday practice of teaching. This was a new practice for me when I began in September 2013, a time when reforms were introduced into social work education in the UK. The reforms emphasised the need for social workers to be able to develop effective relationships with service users and professionals. In response to this, I chose to inquire into how I would teach using a relationship based approach, modelling how relationships could be developed. This paper seeks to explain relationship based teaching and present this with alongside current teaching approaches. It then explores the methods intended to be used in the inquiry and considers issues such as power and ethics.

Key words: *relationship based, practice, teaching, systemic*

1. Research question

Teaching as conversation: Developing a Relationship Based Practice when teaching Social Work students

“The metaphor of “teaching as conversation” is useful because it makes the ritualised practice of education familiar in a different way. It shifts teaching and learning from a focus of method for conveying knowledge to a process that is attentive to the ways in which participants create meaning together” Sheila McNamee (2007:334).

1.2 The Aim(s) and main objectives of the inquiry

There are several questions the research aims to answer:

1. What is the difference between relationship based approach to teaching and a traditional approach to educating students?
2. How do I develop a relationship based practice within the constraints of a university with a traditional approach to educating and students who may expect a traditional style?
3. How will I know if I am practising as a relationship based educator?
4. What difference might it make to the students learning experience and subsequent practice as social workers if they were educated from a relationship based approach?
5. What learning can there be for myself and others?

1.3 Hoped Outcome/Results

- A relationship based approach embedded in my practice
- An alternative approach for other educators to be aware of
- A sense of “community” and collaboration between the students

- The use of a relationship based approach to enable students to more easily develop relationships with their service users.

2. Context of the study

A range of reforms to social work degree programmes were being implemented at the time when I became a Senior Lecturer in Social Work in September 2013. The College of Social Work (TCSW), the body with the responsibility of overseeing the reforms, provided guidance on the how the reforms should be implemented. A piece of guidance that struck me stated

*“programmes must ensure that students learn about the specific needs which may affect all people at different stages of their life experience, and **the core importance of working effectively through building a relationship with individuals, families, groups and communities as appropriate**”* (2011:30), my emphasis.

Of the reforms that were taking place, the discourse around relationships interested me the most. Firstly, although I had been a qualified social worker for over twenty years, I had spent the previous ten years as a civil servant. On my return to the social work profession, I identified a disconnect from relationship based social work practice, which scholars such as Ferguson (2011) and Munro (2011), suggested needed to be re-introduced.

Secondly, reflecting on my own experience of relationships with educators and the difference these relationships made to my learning, I recognised the importance of creating a relationship based approach to my new role as an educator. McNamee and Shotter suggest

“these relationally-responsive forms of understanding all entail our seeing connections and relations within a living whole, a whole constructed or created from many different fragmentary parts” (2004:14)

What I saw on my return to social work was a dis-connection in relationships between social workers and service users. Becoming a social work educator and engaged in a Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice gave me the opportunity in “developing and researching sophisticated systemic ways of working and for creating exceptional, relational achievements” (University of Bedfordshire, PDSP Student Handbook, 2013 page 3). I had an opportunity to become an inside inquirer; to learn from my lived experience as an educator of social work students.

3. Relationship based teaching

Miller and Striver (1977) developed Relational/cultural theory from client-therapist relationship, Edwards and Richards (2002) applied this approach to student-teacher relationships, looking specifically at social work students due to the interpersonal connections in social work. Edwards and Richards present key components of Relational theory which are to have mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment. Mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment within Relational theory need to be considered from a Social Constructionist paradigm in terms of how to co-create these positions of mutuality. There also has to be an acknowledgment of a power imbalance between the student and educator during these co-creations and how this can be managed ethically.

Ward (2010) proposes key elements that apply to teaching from a relationship-based approach. These include working with the process of the helping relationship, attending to the emotional and cognitive elements in practice, maximizing the opportunities for helpful communication, the need for reflection, focusing on the self of the worker and an emphasis on personal qualities and values, (Ward 2010:185). Ward notes ‘Close, supportive and relationship-based teamwork will need to be nurtured in the teaching team in order to be congruent with the proposed model of practice’ (2010:186).

Sheila McNamee (2007) suggests “teaching as conversation” is both a collaborative process of learning as well as a relational practice. She proposes:

“It is a relational practice where participants, both teacher and student, engage in a process of making meaning together. Simply put, meaning is not the possession of one person. It only emerges in the interplay of people interacting with one another”. (2007:314).

I would argue the stronger the relationship between those concerned, the more productive the interplay will be. McNamee’s approach differs from Edwards and Richards in that she discusses the importance of collaboration with all participants, i.e. the teacher and students as a community. She suggests teachers can invite students into “*generative and transformative conversations where we can create what counts as knowledge together*” (2007:317) and sees knowledge as emerging within communities of people working together.

The concept of communities is not new. Wenger (1998) introduced the concept of ‘communities of practice’ to explain the process by which people in specific groups or communities acquire the knowledge, skills and habits. Wenger suggests the structure of communities of practice consists of three interrelated terms. The first, mutual engagement, reminds us of Edwards and Richards (ibid) ideas. Wenger (1998:72) describes mutual engagement as members establishing norms and collaborative relationships which create the community as a social entity. The collaborative relationships in the community are also emphasised within Sheila McNamee’s relational approach. The other interrelated terms presented by Wenger are Joint Enterprise and Shared Repertoire. Joint enterprise is a shared understanding of what connects the community, sometimes referred to as the “domain” of the community. The shared repertoire is the communal resources the community develops.

4. Teaching methods in Higher Education

McNamee (207:315) suggests “*teaching, learning and education overall remain in the dominant individualistic discourse of our culture*”. She argues the focus is on individual students and their ability to learn, comprehend and perform. McNamee further notes that in education, we predominantly see forms of teaching practice that convey knowledge from the educator to the student. This is similar to what Freire (1972:45) defined as the “banking system”, an “*act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor*”. Rather than teach, educators narrate what pupils were required to know and pupils memorise what they are told; Freire likened the process to that of filling a container with information. For several decades there have been attempts to shift from the “banking system”. Tight (1996:26) suggests teaching is “*no longer seen as imparting knowledge and doing things to the student, but is redefined as facilitation of self-directed learning*” However, self directed learning is an individual activity. Furthermore, Banning (2004) notes that “*Poor facilitation of learning can have a detrimental effect on student morale, and induce reduced confidence and motivation to achieve.*

Despite the attempts to shift teaching practices, Walkin (2000:55) suggests didactic methods such as the banking system continue to be used in lectures as “*an economical means of transmitting factual information to a large audience, although there is no guarantee that effective learning will result*”.

Banning (2005) suggests “*Didacticism raises numerous constraints which involve rote learning, learning by note taking, and potential boredom as the approach limits student participation and reflection*”. As a result other methods have been introduced to increase participation.

Burgess and Taylor (2005) discuss “active learning” a teaching approach that provides a shift from the didactic method highlighted by Freire and ensures student participation. Active learning, involves the student having to conduct problem solving based exercises “*in which higher-order cognitive activities are not optional, but required*” Burgess and Taylor (2005:6). The approach involves the educator setting a range of activities for the students, possibly providing instructions, which could be written.

The level of dialogue required between the student and teacher can be minimal as the method to learning is an individual, cognitive process (Biggs 1999). However, it was precisely this cognitive approach to social work where “*the emphasis has been on the conscious, cognitive elements of the task of working with children and families*” Munro (2011:86) seeks to avoid in social work practice which

we would be presenting to social work students. A further disadvantage to the active learning approach is that it does not necessitate a student/teacher relationship or necessarily foster a collaborative community.

5. Proposed plan of research

I intend to build on McNamee's metaphor of teaching as conversation and attempt to co create a community approach in the classroom. This will be by using Edwards and Richards ideas of empathy, empowerment, engagement and aspects of Wards key elements of a relationship based approach in addition to my understanding of my own practice through reflexivity, There are a range of methods I intend to use within this inquiry including; reflexivity, heuristic inquiry and auto ethnography. Etherington (2004) suggests "the use of self has become more and more legitimate in research". Indeed to be reflexive requires us to have an "*ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events and use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications, understandings. To be reflexive we need to be aware of our personal responses and make choices on how to use them*" (2004:19).

I intend to use reflexivity as a research method as it is meaningful to this inquiry for a number of reasons. Firstly, to assist me in my awareness of how I am in the learning space. This connects to what Shotter (2012) explained as "*a knowing to do with ones participation within a situation*", unless I reflect on my practice, I will not *know* what I have been doing to be able to then act reflexively. Secondly, Burnham (1993) suggests that self reflexivity is required to create awareness and exploration of a person's coherence in relation to each of the Social GRRAACCEESS (Gender, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Colour, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Sexuality and Spirituality). As a black woman, and senior lecturer, the position of power can shift and change in response to the situation:

"depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed". Hill Collins (1990: 221).

I require an amount of self reflexivity to be aware of when the power may shift towards potential oppressor in relation to the students and how I manage this ethically. Thirdly, my reflexive research will sit alongside the students' requirement to reflect their learning; we would all be keeping similar style journals of our journeys while reflexively shaping and improving our practice. I would consider using a combination of reflexive models to maximise the benefits that each of them provide by using Borton (1970) for brief reflection, for example if I am reflecting in action (Schon 1983) where there is only a short period of time to reflect. However, I would use Johns (2009) if I wanted to discuss my emotions when reflecting on action and go into more detail than Borton's model allows. Becoming a relationship based educator will undoubtedly lead to personal growth for me in my role. There would need to be a process of reflexive self examination to explore how this is happening. Heuristic inquiry is a method that embraces self examination and as such sits in a comfortable space with reflexive research. Furthermore, the definition of heuristic inquiry speaks to where I am in relation to my inquiry topic. Moustakas cited in Etherington states:

Heuristic inquiry is a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer. The question has been one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one's self and the world in which on lives. The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social and perhaps universal significance. (1990: 15)

As soon as I began to practice in the role of "lecturer" I became immersed in questions about how to practice, who to be, what to be with the students. This is the second stage of Moustakas six stages of heuristic inquiry. My experience of these stages was not orderly or linear. After experiencing immersion whereby I was immersed in almost every waking and sleeping moment about the question of how to teach, I moved to "initial engagement", what is in fact the first of six stages where the inquirer locates them self and guides the research. Then came the third stage of incubation when there is a retreat from the intensity of the research question for a while, allowing a space for new ideas to emerge through dreams, ideas or images. This was when different ideas about methods of inquiry

began to emerge. The fourth stage is explication; articulating and making sense of the material. Subsequently, the fifth stage of creative synthesis occurs when the researcher compiles the core themes into a report, narrative or some form of text or artwork that depicts an integration of the material. The sixth stage is validation of the heuristic inquiry; does the synthesis provide an accurate representation of what was collected? This question should be asked by participant feedback or a similar mechanism.

As I hope to co-construct with students the sense of community, mutual empathy, engagement and empowerment as well as aspects of the key elements of Ward (ibid), social constructionist-based research will inevitably form part of my inquiry. Cunliffe (2008) suggests social constructionist research spans such methods as: narrative analysis, semiotics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, social poetics, ethnography and autoethnography.

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis et al (2010:1).

Autoethnography is relevant to this inquiry as it will be my personal participation with students that affects what is being taught. It sits closely with heuristic inquiry as the heuristic process is autobiographical. Ellis et al (ibid) suggests an ethnographer may also interview cultural members; in my case students, examine members ways of speaking and relating and investigate uses of space and place. There are inevitably criticisms of autoethnography as method. Maréchal (2010) suggests criticism has been in relation to “*validity on grounds of being unrepresentative and lacking objectivity*”. She also notes that evocative styles of autoethnography writing have been criticised for their “*lack of ethnographic relevance as a result of being too personal*” (2010:45)

Other criticisms have been raised regarding the limits to self-knowledge (Wilson and Dunn, 2004) and self-report narratives (Polkinghorne, 2005) and how this is accounted for in autoethnographic research. Despite the criticisms, the autoethnographic approach has the benefit of me becoming the object of my own research, having tacit knowledge about how a situation is emerging. This is not possible with a researcher imposing their own interpretation on the situation; writing from a position of “about-ness” rather than with-ness” Shotter (2012).

Not only could criticisms arise from my use of autoethnography, I could be criticised for using this combination of methods. One obvious method for consideration is Action Research, which has a long tradition of being applied to research in education, Elliot (1991). He defined it as “*the Study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it*” (1991:69). He suggested the aim was to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. This is contrary to Kincheloe et al (2011) when they suggest a teachers’ use of authority should involve conducting research to produce knowledge. However, Simon, connects Elliot and Kincheloe ideas by creating the term “Praction Research” which she suggests “*helps me stay mindful of the relationships between practice and research and between activity and activism*” (2012:104).

I am mindful not be seduced into choosing a method purely on the basis that is traditionally applied in education, as something different could emerge from using a different methodology. McNamee (2004) suggests

“promiscuity in systemic practice allows practitioners to treat theories as discursive options which open up or close down relational possibilities”. I do not want to close down any new possibilities by using the same old method before considering others. Choosing a method or methods generally associated to disciplines outside of the area of research, in my case education and social work, could open up more and different possibilities. Multidisciplinary research or the bricolage, a term introduced by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) invites researchers to use a range of multidisciplinary methods that can adequately inquire into the complexity of the lived world and power dynamics within in. Kincheloe et al suggest “*Such multidisciplinary demands a new level of research conscious and awareness of the numerous context in which any researcher is operating*”. (2011:168)

With this bricolage in mind, for the moment I will stay with methods that I have chosen to take my research inquiry forward. These methods may change; as Simon (2013) suggests

It may be more useful and in keeping with a systemic approach to think about research as a process of mutual shaping in which researchers and co-researchers are changed by each other and by the activities; in turn, the research methods and activities also evolve through the influence of researchers and co-researchers (2013:3).

The flexibility in shifting research methods in the way Simon (ibid) proposes could be seen as ethical. The researchers and co-researchers are collaboratively working and influencing the potential for new methods as the research develops and changing the methods in response to what is emergent rather than remaining wedded to the original methods because they were intended to be used.

6. Ethical considerations

“To deny the role of authority the teacher occupies is insincere at best, dishonest at worst. Critical teachers, therefore, must admit they are in a position of authority and then demonstrate that authority in their actions in support of students. One action involves the ability to conduct research and produce knowledge” Kincheloe et al, (2011:165).

As an educator I have the power to invite students to speak or be silenced, to assess and grade their work, to make recommendations about the progress etc. Therefore the concept of mutual empathy, engagement and empowerment posed by Edwards and Richards needs to be considered in the context of how mutuality can be achieved in relationships where there is a power in-balance. Relational ethics guides the inquiry process from how we dialogue with others, how we use our power, how we challenge the use of power by others, how we listen and act upon our inner dialogues through reflexivity, how we privilege the text that we carry forward into our inquiry and the transparency within which we situate ourselves as inquirers, Simon (2013). Ellis (2007) discusses relational ethics which reflects the similarities of a relationship based approach;

“Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work focuses on the changing relationship between researcher and research participants.” Lincoln, (1995:287) cited in Ellis (2007).

Ultimately, it is these ethical principles that should be present in the student/educator relationship and consequently the social worker/service user relationship.

7. Summary

In the latest social work training reforms, there is an emphasis on students having the ability to work effectively through building relationships with individuals, families, groups and communities. Joining the teaching profession as social work educator at the time of these reforms, I intended my practice to be relationship based; valuing the importance of building relationships with the students and them with each other to develop a learning community who would ultimately have the skills to build relationships as qualified social workers. As my practice continues, no doubt I will face some challenges in this endeavour – challenges likely to be similar to those faced by social workers when attempting to build relationships with service users.

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