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Dialogues in Widening Participation: Transitions to professional qualification and the importance of self-directed learning

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1. Abstract

This paper explores some of the research processes and outcomes that emerged from the first stage of investigation into a widening participation initiative for professional training into social work in the UK. Programme evaluation is a complex and multi-faceted undertaking that often highlights the research dilemmas of 'methods and mess'. The journey from planned structure to messy real-life realities and back to re-focused intervention and dialogue can be both a frustrating and a rewarding aspect of research into educational experiences. In this example, the progressive refinement of aims led to the re-discovery of Personal Construct Psychology as an empowering and dialogic method par excellence.

Key words

Widening participation; social work; adult learners; self-directed learning; transitions; professional identity; personal construct psychology

2. Entree:

The best research can often be a voyage of discovery. Setting forth with a clear idea of what you hope to demonstrate or disprove can have value for some, particularly focused, undertakings. However, one of the advantages of an open approach is that it allows scope for serendipitous changes of course, redrawing of maps and unplanned discoveries. In this investigation we set out with a very clear plan and itinerary but found some routes to be impassable or non-existent and so had to re-plot our route with the help of passengers that had joined the journey. OK, that's probably taken the metaphor far enough! But it introduces a sense of what we want to convey about our experiences as researchers engaging with participants; we started off in one direction but ended up somewhere very different but just as, if not more, interesting. This paper outlines and explores some of the transformative dialogues that enabled this to happen.

3. Introduction

The research that this paper describes started out as a one year funded investigation with a focus upon evaluating a professional learning programme and exploring the experiences of assessment of practice-based learning [PBL]. As we will describe, it only partially achieved some of these aims but, nonetheless, through the research processes, established new and unexpected directions. In social work, 'assessment' is an under-researched concept both theoretically and in the relationship between its practice and educative applications. The project aimed to explore some of the key socio-cultural interdependencies (Billett, 2001) within which assessment

practices are embedded in PBL. Some of the key areas for investigation included students' critical understanding of 'assessment' as a major role and task of professional social work practice in the UK (Crisp *et al.*, 2005). Similarly, we aimed to explore students' growing awareness of the impact upon them of practice-based assessment of their professional learning (Cooper & Broadfoot, 2006). Within an initial aim of programme evaluation we wanted to identify the influence of students' line manager and colleagues within students' experiences of PBL and the identification of other workplace characteristics and affordances that may support, promote or adversely impact upon the students' experience of PBL (Cooper & Rixon, 2001).

It was hoped that the empirical data may contribute towards a further understanding and application of the theoretical notion of a 'connective pedagogy' (Griffiths, 2003) where PBL experience should no longer be viewed just as helping students to develop a technical competence in 'something' but more where PBL experience should be viewed as a means of developing an involved sense of practice-based responsibility. To this extent, the concept of 'consequential transitions' (Beach, 1999) helps us to recognise the extra dynamics arising from the exploration of new learning opportunities in which pre-learned responses and solutions need to be reconstructed and transformed. Such transitions may involve changes in identity as well as changes in knowledge and skill involving the full person and their learning environment and not just learned attributes or techniques. This entails learning how to contribute to the transformation of work contexts. In this sense, a 'connective' model of pedagogy and learning in work-based contexts helps direct attention to how individuals learn, grow and develop through the strength and richness of their interactions and applications within and between different contexts. As we will see, an unexpected outcome of this research enquiry was its sharpened and renewed focus, away from the environmental factors, upon the importance of reflective dialogues with individuals that encouraged the creation, awareness and ownership of self-directed learning aims within these contexts. The programme chosen for this investigation offered opportunities to explore these issues and an explanatory background is outlined in the next section.

4. Background and context

The Open University is the largest single provider of qualification routes into professional social work in the UK. It has a substantial track record of widening participation in Higher Education and it shares these values with Unison as the largest public service Trade Union in the UK. Together we piloted a new route to the social work degree, and we called it the Learning Partnership Route (LPR). The academic and practice content remained the same as the standard degree in social work, but the LPR offers a package of support tailored to the needs of non-traditional work-based students as part of The Open University's and Unison's commitment to widening the participation of social care staff in professional training and education. The key aims of the LPR are:

- to target employees who have experience in social care work but who do not have higher educational qualifications
- to provide additional support to maximise successful outcomes of degree-level professional and academic studies

The major advantages of this partnership approach are intended to help employers extend the recruitment base of qualified social workers for their workforce, demonstrate their commitment to staff development, and increase the likelihood of professional staff staying with their employers.

The need to widen participation

The Open University and Unison have a long tradition of providing opportunities for a wide range of students, including those who have had limited access to educational opportunities earlier in life. As a result, the educational background of Open University social work students varies considerably, and some have greater need for learning support than others. There are many employees in social care who have worked effectively for many years but not had the opportunity to fulfil their potential through higher academic or professional education. The LPR aims to provide an environment of supported learning specifically focused on such students.

The potential of the workplace as a key learning environment

The Open University's Social Work Degree Programme, as with all social work education, draws widely on the resources of the workplace, especially as a source of practice learning. Because all Open University social work students are employed in social care agencies while studying, they are encouraged to seek help from colleagues and line managers, as well as practice assessors. The Programme is also able to establish a strong team learning approach among the students themselves. This places a high value on students' previous and current work experience while enabling them to develop best practice both for themselves and to constructively encourage it in others.

Social care organisation employers are obliged, under the UK Care Councils' Codes of Practice (GSCC, 2002) to encourage the continuous professional development of their staff. The increased academic demands of social work training resulting from the move from a diploma to a degree-level qualification are expected to present a challenge to many. It is hoped that all participants within organisations offering work-based learning can help embed the learning culture of the LPR into their agencies' strategic training and workforce development plans. In the LPR, formal as well as informal arrangements aim to ensure that the resources of employers, The Open University and Unison are focused on the needs of students. By ensuring that the three partners work together to encourage and support the students, the LPR set out to develop best practice in work-based education.

5. Research reflections and key themes

Practice-based professional learning is complex and none more so than in social work education. Within this small-scale one year funded initial investigation of practice-based assessment issues the relationship between method and mess is a good way of illustrating both the difficulties and the creative opportunities that can arise from research into these areas.

Law (2004) offers some interesting thoughts on how, as researchers, we often try to control and capture the messy realities of our research enquiries within carefully constructed methods. The need for clear structures and parameters to clarify the focus

of the research is always going to be of value. However, it is important not to 'miss the muddle' and thereby rule out the ambiguous, perplexing and often uncomfortably changing nature of social realities. This crucial relationship between method and muddle emerged as a helpful learning theme from both the interviews undertaken and from the evaluation of this project. On reflection, the twinning of clarity and confusion is maybe not surprising. In social work, as in other examples of professional education for personal and health services, there is a growing tension between institutional and regulatory frameworks that codify practice on the one hand; while, at the same time, the individual and social experience of practice and learning for practice is often one of ambiguity and disorder in changing lives (Parton, 1998; Schon, 1983). In other words, in social work, students are assessed against seductively ordered and rational sets of criteria and evidence indicators while, at the same time, learning to assess others in situations of extraordinary complexity and moral muddle as part of interventions into the lives of people. The participants' experiences, revealed through our research, reflected many of the dilemmas that we felt as the researchers in trying to undertake something as apparently simple as an 'evaluation'.

Our proposed methods were clear: questionnaires to all; focus group discussions; individual interviews with a sample; all progressively refining the focus and clarifying the themes. Simple really. However, the reality of real-life research is not that simple as it often mirrors the complexities and 'mess' of real-life practices. What actually happened is that not all the questionnaires were returned; the volunteers to take part in individual interviews weren't quite as representative a sample as we would have liked; the carefully recorded results of the focus group discussions had inexplicably failed to be backed up and then were wiped due to a hard-drive glitch. Luckily, we still had the flip-chart write-ups. So, things can and do make unanticipated changes in the real world. For example, it turned out that only one of the three research cohorts progressed as planned into a second year of practice learning opportunities. Evaluation is a deceptively simple word, but it can lead the unwary to assume a static evaluative state of affairs or to overlook the complex changing nature of social phenomena. Awareness of changing complexities requires difficult questions to be constantly asked, such as; evaluate what aspect? . . . and against what criteria? Whose perspectives should it be from - students, sponsors, managers, tutors, programme managers, faculty partners, etc. . . . ??

The resulting data, collected after a year of mess threatening to take over from method, bore only a little resemblance to the proposal. Nonetheless, from the panning through the shifting alluvial silt of qualitative data, there emerged a number of compelling individual accounts and perspectives of practice-based professional learning. Some examples of these are outlined in the next section as phase 1 dialogues. Towards the end of this qualitative data panning process, however, at the bottom of the pan, there appeared some tiny specks of gold to indicate richer seams that were mined towards the end of the project. These are described later as phase 2 dialogues.

6. Pursuing the personal: some emerging themes from phase 1 dialogues

The first phase of focus group discussions and resulting follow-up interviews with individuals were productive processes of enquiry that led to the emergence of

constellations of themes. Exploration and analysis of these themes led to a progressive focus upon the unique circumstances of each individual participant in the context of their personal lives, histories, current circumstances and aspirations. This gave rise to a subsequent, and unplanned, second phase of the research investigation through the development of a new research tool with which we aimed to 'capture the personal' and which we will describe later. The first phase themes are outlined below with some explanation and illustrative extracts from the dialogues.

Theme 1 - Non-qualified worker to professional learner

The programme aim of widening participation gave rise to many comments from the research participants about the different transitions needed to make a qualitative shift from non-qualified worker to professional learner. These were grouped into three main aspects:

Workplace status	staff to student
Learner	evidence of 'competence' to reflective PBPL
Self	family patterns and learning baggage

Practice-based learning, particularly within the participants' own workplace, necessitates a change in status amongst work colleagues from staff worker to student. This is often described metaphorically as being allowed to 'put on a student hat' as the signifier of a change in attitude, tasks and roles within the workplace. This isn't easy and demands flexibility amongst the pre-existing workplace relationships and a willingness to change expectations. There was no set pattern to this within the results and individuals' experiences varied enormously in their ability to successfully negotiate this important transition with key 'others' within their work setting. The degree of success experienced through the negotiations for this consequential transition can have a significant impact upon learners' experiences

Many social care workplaces in the UK have been persuaded to undertake a national system of training for vocational qualifications known as NVQ. The theoretical and practical basis of the educational experience for these qualifications has been subject to great debate and not a small amount of criticism [see, as a small example, (Barnett, 1994; Bridges, 1996; Eraut, 1994; Hager & Gonczi, 1996; Lum, 1999; Wolf, 1999)].

This is an illustrative quote about one aspect of the transitions that learners can go through:

. . . well, it [previous training] was quite heavy It was very different from what I expected. It was more a case of not learn - I didn't feel that the NVQ was actually learning, it was actually just producing evidence that you know - and I felt that the degree is more about learning Expecting you to have that experience . . . because I think they actually ask you to think about things - e.g. they give you a situation and ask you 'how would you relate to this?' The OU stuff has actually taught me stuff I've never heard of Some of it actually understanding what is going on with the service users.

This last statement speaks volumes about the shift from a training focus upon the worker to professional perspectives that require the development of empathy with others. This particular transition was especially important for students from a 'widening participation' background with less experience of the expectations for professional social work practice.

Each individual had their own histories and family patterns which gave rise to expectations about learning derived from 'learning baggage' that they brought with them to the programme. Again, these varied to a great extent but it was important to recognise that they played a part as influences upon the practical and emotional experiences felt by participants. For example, there can be significant differences in the learning episodes of single people with educational achievements and few obligations compared to those with caring responsibilities for children or significant others whose background may be characterised by struggles with less than helpful formative school experiences.

Theme 2 - Achieving qualifications later in life: Knowing 'self' and the 'right time' to study

Many of the students on this programme are 'mature students', many are women with considerable life experience, often as carers, and typical of those who are able to benefit from the advantages of 'learn while you earn' courses that do not require people to become full-time students in order to gain professional qualifications and a foot on a career ladder. A number of participant's spoke of the personally significant step of working towards the achievement of qualifications later in life and the trade-offs that have to occur to make study a reality:

To be truthful I did start that [a specialist module] off my own back a few years ago. But at that time, personal things at home and the fact that I went full-time at work meant that I couldn't give it what I needed to and I think I got about a third of the way through and I thought "well this seems mad . . . I know what the course is, perhaps I can pick it up later". But even then I knew my capabilities and I knew that I'd got this new full-time job and things weren't . . . my children were younger and, and my mum and dad were ill. So I knew my capabilities and I thought right okay, that will have to go on hold, yeah. So, but now is the right time for me to study, so, yeah.

Many of the struggles that were described entailed knowing one's self in terms of personal 'readiness' and gauging the right time to study but also needing to counter the effects of expectations from personal and family histories:

In the background I came from . . . there were six children in my family, working class people . . . you were expected to get a job, you weren't encouraged to go out and go to college and things like that . . . you were expected to get a wage . . . to look after children. So, for me, to become a Nursery Nurse was like a major thing. But even to get on that. I got told by one of the tutors, you were on the borderline, so that was like, phew, a big confidence drop. They don't realise, I suppose, all those years ago, that's what happened.

But now, just to sit there with all these people and you could tell they are people with like so many life skills and so many qualifications, even in the tutorial, there were so many other people that are students, to be with them, that was one of my scary things as well.

Theme 3 - Overlay of assessment in social work education: Assessing and being assessed

Assessment has become a major role and task of social work in the UK (Clifford, 1998; Cooper, 2006; Fook, 2002; Middleton, 1997; Milner & O'Byrne, 2002; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Smale & Tuson, 1993) and has become increasingly recognised as a powerful influence within educational processes of adult teaching and learning (Boud, 1995; Broadfoot, 1996; Broadfoot & Pollard, 2000; Edwards & Knight, 1995).

Participants were asked about how they perceived the relationship between their assessment practices as social workers and how they were being assessed as part of their practice assessment for learning. The line of enquiry surprised many as it interrogated aspects of practice that are rarely questioned. Some grasped the connections quickly but struggled to untangle the reflexive nature of assessment:

What I was going to say is that I think if I'm a service user, if someone listens to you, I think that would be really important if they're doing an assessment of you, and takes your views, rather than just filling in a form and making a judgement. And also that you had a half-decent relationship with the person that was doing the assessment. That you trusted them. Yeah, so I think probably the same, that it would be good to have a good relationship in my practice.

However, the similarities but differences in power relationship were often well understood:

I think that sometimes it's very personal with a service user because they may be being assessed because there's child protection issues or something like that, and it can be very emotional. Whereas I don't think it would be quite as personal or emotional [for me] being assessed as it's not a life and death situation.

If you do it wrong then they're going to help you . . . If you're being assessed as a service user, to see whether children can stay with you, that's going to be feeling different . . . And also, I have the confidence of feeling I've got some skills already, and they might feel totally de-skilled and totally like you're in a very powerful position. Although, I suppose I feel the practice assessor is in quite a powerful position because they can pass or fail me. So, I'll be very nice to them . . . give them lots of tea.

[N.B. this is in England, hence the significance of 'tea' as a currency!]

Similarly, the issue of assessment provoked some interesting dialogues as participants struggled with connections that they hadn't considered before. The following is a typical example of someone thinking the thing through:

I think you need to . . . if I was being assessed for a need or I'm being assessed for my practice, I need to have an active involvement in that. You can't just take a passive role because if you take a passive role, you're not going to learn anything

and I think the whole way that we work now, you are trying to empower people, you're looking at anti-oppressive practice and if you just go in and you say "This is this and that is that", you're cutting across that completely. You have to look at what they think their options, what their choices are and the decisions that they want to make in their life, in their home, in their employment. It's the same in our team now I think about it. I think just looking at the team, there are managers that work in very different ways; some are very autocratic, some are very democratic and I'm fortunate enough to have a very democratic manager that actually allows me to participate . . . because I don't think . . . I would feel much more constrained with an autocratic manager.

This quote is a good example of how dialogues can be transformative in professional education. The focus upon a key aspect of practice has been linked to an equally key aspect of practice learning and the dialogue has enabled connections to be made between principles and values that hadn't been previously considered. In other words, many participants recognised that what they valued as practitioners undertaking assessment practices with service users, such as, participation, empowerment, respect for diversity and difference, on reflection they also valued for themselves as practitioners being assessed for professional practice learning. This association between the domains of learning in and for practice can be seen as an example of pedagogical connectivity (Griffiths, 2003) where the learner is enabled to develop personal insights into the reciprocal nature of professional practices and professional learning for practices. As researchers, this kind of conceptual struggle and creativity seemed to us to get near to the core of the kind of learning transitions that people need to make in order to take ownership of their own professional development paths.

At this stage of the research enquiry we were struggling with the fact that our initial plans for programme evaluation were not going to work. However, of more importance was our need to discover where this break from the initial research boundaries was taking us. After much reflection upon the results of our interviews and data from our focus group discussions, we recognised that our individual participants were similarly struggling with wanting to take ownership of where they were in their learning journeys and be more in touch with their direction of travel. We captured this unexpected outcome of the research enquiry through a renewed aim of 'reflective help to generate personal learning aims & needs'. In many ways this theme captured the dilemma for learners of needing to construct their own methods out of the messy realities of PBL. In other words, while there was an awareness of having to work within the imposed frameworks for learning and assessment of professional competence, there emerged a need to also generate personally meaningful learning aims and goals. The claim that 'The standards provide a benchmark of 'best practice' in social work competence across [sic] the UK' (TopssEngland, 2004) can be criticised as educationally and theoretically mistaken (Cooper & Broadfoot, 2006). A shift in focus of educational purpose from institutional frameworks to individual learners is subtle but fundamentally important as it represents an individual and personal ownership of the processes of knowledge construction. It recognises that frameworks of requirements are just that - only a framework. This subtle but profound re-balancing of interests between institutional power and individual interests called for an enquiry tool that focused on people and

personal values. For this, in phase 2 of the enquiry, we turned to personal construct psychology [PCP].

7. Capturing the personal: phase 2 constructs and self-generated learning

PCP, as a theory and methodology, has been used extensively in a wide range of research applications in all fields of social life from business to education and, as it was originally devised, within a wide range of clinical applications (Fransella, 2003). Whilst PCP has been used in mainstream education (Pope & Denicolo, 2001; Pope & Keen, 1981), there have been few published studies of the use of repertory grid methodologies within social work education. For an occupation that is arguably based upon the professional need to ascertain others' meaning and world view, this seems striking. The arguments for the importance of the PCP approach centre upon accessing participants' views of themselves, how they make sense of their worlds and, therefore, how they make sense of elements of the defined research focus. This 'personal / psychological learner-centred' approach, it is argued, is frequently missing from studies of education. Indeed, it was identified in a major study of assessment and learning (Black & William, 1998) as a key aspect of under-researched areas of educational enquiry. We therefore chose PCP and repertory tools as being theoretically and methodologically coherent. They offered research approaches with which to explore the ways in which the participants perceived, or constructed, key elements of themselves and others within a socio-culturally defined conception of practice learning environments.

Drawing upon the theoretical and methodological potential of PCP (Fransella *et al.*, 2003; Kelly, 1991) we developed a flexible technique, the 'professional identity transition tool' (PITT), for eliciting self-generated constructs of personal meaning and value. PITT aims to specify and clarify the focus and direction of participants' professional learning journeys by recognising the personal need for awareness and ownership of self-directed meanings within social work practice and education (Cooper & Pickering, In preparation, forthcoming). This new approach derives from reflective activities involving participants' self-perceptions and of social workers they have encountered from within their workplace learning environments. It is from these rich dialogues that individuals are enabled to elicit and capture personal constructs of their own social work values. Through the prioritising and scaling of these constructs, personal goals, learning objectives and meaningful steps in reaching these can be developed. The following offers an overview of the processes involved and a sample of the results.

The basic PCP repertory tool intervention consists of a number of 'elements' that make up the focus of research. In this case, as described at the beginning of this paper, we were interested in how the individual saw themselves within the context of significant others in their learning environment. These elements are a mix of researcher supplied categories within which the participant generates meaningful examples. So, for example, the researcher supplied the following element categories written on separate cards:

1. Me as a student social worker (a learner)
2. Me as an unqualified worker (e.g. me - a support worker)
3. The qualified social worker I would like to be

4. My supervisor

Although these categories were supplied, the 'meaningfulness' of them had still to be generated by the participant. The participant then generated an additional five elements by writing on five more cards the names of social workers they have known or work with now. These five elements were required to be a mixture of "good" and "bad" social workers in order to provide contrast. Again, as such, the particular examples generated were personally meaningful only to the individual.

The participant numbered their elements 1 - 9 and then chose any three to look at and think about at one time. For each triad of elements the participant was asked the same question (known in PCP as the triadic elicitation question):

How are two of these alike and different from the third?

or

In what way are two of these similar but different from the third?

For example, one participant described the similarity between two elements as "being boundaried" and the difference being "over, beyond a line, too involved"

This was expressed as a bi-polar construct:

Being boundaried **versus** beyond a line, too involved

In this pilot study each individual elicited six constructs with different triads. The participants then looked at the constructs and prioritised them according to what was most important *to them* from their perspective within social work. Scaling was then used for the participant to self-measure and project where they would like to progress and what that progress would look like.

Staying with the above example the participant used the construct to form the following 0-10 scale:

Over indulging in caring; danger of wanting everything to be OK	versus	Caring, but realistic boundaries
0	_____	10

The participant placed herself at 6 on this scale, saying she would like to be at 8 or 9. She viewed this as an important movement to make in her time as a student. A further stage of the exploration then pursues the concrete steps that the student would need to take in order to bring this change about within the specific learning context in which they are operating. Annex 1 offers examples from two further participants to illustrate how productive the PITT technique can be.

PITT was pre-piloted with two students undertaking their first year of studies in the social work programme and the last words should go to these two students and the researcher who carried out the work:

Student 1

If you'd asked me about social work values at the beginning I wouldn't have known what to say - I've now said all this - it's brought it all out.

Student 2

This is great, really helpful. It helps me to know what it is that's important and how I want to be. I wouldn't have been able to break it down to say why so and so is a good social worker or not.

Researcher

It is such a process of self-discovery, of finding and bringing out what people know, but didn't know that they knew. It is an exciting process to witness. It is this self-discovery that provides another layer of learning. An interview like this is like a capsule in which only one thing is looked at - the other person's self-discovery. It is focused and incisive - it triggers connection after connection like a pinball machine - you see the lights coming on as well!

8. Concluding comments

It has been a fascinating journey of discovery - from methodical proposal to messy actualities and back to new research method, with much learnt along the way!

Within a social work education context of increasingly complex frameworks and demanding requirements of curricula and occupational standards, three main arguments emerged from the project. Firstly, that the effectiveness of widening participation initiatives depends upon the successful initiation and maintenance of personal engagements in the transitions necessary for degree level learning. Second, that ownership of reflexive learning journeys in education contexts is a pre-requisite for reflective practices in partnership with service users. Third, that approaches and techniques for the self-generation of personal values and directions - asking learners to develop their own preferred futures and learning pathways - are currently underplayed but foundational factors in practice learning.

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