

Thresholds to cross when learning social care practice

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Abstract

This article considers if analysis of social work novice to expert stage models of professional development can infer threshold points for social care students when acquiring role identity and enactment. Initially the article landscapes social care education, it then illustrates how threshold concepts theory is useful to exploring placement based learning, provides an analysis of three stage models of professional development (Reynolds, 1942; Saari, 1981; 1989/2012; Holman and Freed, 1987) before suggested thresholds of learning, encountered during placement for Irish social care students. The article concludes by considering placement as a liminal space for professional identity formation, but also for the reconstitution of conceptual knowledge into practice knowledge.

Key words: social care education; threshold learning; social care identity; reconstituted identity

Introduction

I aim to make a theoretical contribution to discipline thresholds associated with Irish social care work. Meyer and Land (2006) contend that each discipline has its own thresholds, and liken these to 'passing through a portal' providing 'previously inaccessible ways of thinking' (p.3 & 7). Threshold concepts framework is a new discourse in Irish social care, with only three examples of its use. Drawing on the work of Clouder (2005), Taylor and Share (2012) explored how students learn about 'caring' as a threshold of practice during placement. Byrne-Lancaster (2013) used discourse analysis to identify three concepts that underpin social care practice. Contending the wording of accepted definitions of Irish social care (Joint Committee on Social Care

Professions, 2000; Irish Association Social Care Educators 2004; CORU – Irish Health and Social Care Council, 2012) infer quality of life space, person centred practice and empowerment through advocacy as key social care practice concepts. Prendergast (2014) correctly highlights the impossibility of designing the placement module of social care programmes around a threshold concepts framework due limited research into practice-based learning and the lack of nationally agreed minimum professional practice standards. My PhD research is exploring placement-based learning experiences of Irish social care students and findings may bring some luminosity to the existing void relating to placement-based learning (pbl). With the study aiming to

- *identify and classify knowledge acquired by social care students during pbl perceived as most significant to their professional development*
- *ascertain social infrastructures, critical moments, and pedagogically rich activities which facilitate pbl*
- *consider how challenges to pbl are encountered, and overcome by social care students*

it may identify social care students learning stories and social care's induction narratives. Insights gained from the research may help students, educators, and practice supervisors understand with greater surety the process associated with social care practice-based learning. The research has the opportunity to inform a national model of placement based learning and suggest pedagogical practices that support placement-based learning.

Irish Social Care practice education

At present a BA qualification situated at level seven of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is the required academic qualification to practice as a social care worker in Ireland. Placement on fulltime social care programmes is structured in as a 'block placement', usually experienced in second and third year of the programme (Courtney, 2012), with students encouraged to experience work with different social care client groups in each placement experience (Doyle & Lalor, 2013; Byrne-Lancaster, 2014). In an attempt to standardise the conceptual knowledge attained by graduates, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) devised Social

Care Award Standards (HETAC, 2010) in consultation with three key social care stakeholders: workers, managers, and educators, Quality and Qualifications Framework (QQI) adopted the standards when they took control of the governance of further and higher education in Ireland. Although the standards mandate 800 hours of placement experience across the first three years of study, they stop short of identifying specific requirements around social care practice knowledge, skills, or competencies.

The responsibility for registering social care workers in the future will fall to the Irish Health and Social Care Professions Council (CORU). Standard 5 of the draft Standards for Education and Training (CORU, 2012b), focuses on practice placement. The standard makes suggestions about the regulation of placement experiences gained during initial education of professions for which CORU have or will have regulatory responsibility. Although anticipated in the near future, social care is currently not a regulated profession, and as an unregulated profession, social care has no entry-level practice standards. However, Irish Association of Social Care Educators (IASCE) Practice Placement Manual (2013) provides national guidance to providers of social care education regarding placement. The manual articulates the centrality of placement and 'real-life relevant situations' (p.5) to social care education, emphasising the importance of students being prepared for and responsible within placement. The broad-spectrum learning objectives suggest a relationship based approach to service user engagement and encourage reflective practice (p.11). To support placement-based supervisors, IASCE (2006) devised a special purpose award in student supervision. Typically delivered over a period of a number of weeks, the three-day course provides practitioners who supervise social care students, with knowledge and skills drawn from supervision, coaching and mentoring. The course has voluntary participation, and uptake nationally is uneven. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the increase in practitioner workload is preventing training release. To give guidance to academics responsible for organising and regulating placement, IASCE (2012) produced four practice placement policy guidelines focused on the suitability of social care agencies as sites for learning, the preparation of students for placement, and the disclosure by students of circumstance that could affect their engaging in practice on placement and consequently professional learning. Due to the paramount position given to the welfare of vulnerable service-users, IASCE (2012) recommends students be given one opportunity to repeat placement over the course of their education and suggests that the college tutor can

“remove a student at any stage if there are serious concerns regarding his/her ability to learn or to cope with the demands in the placement setting, or if his/her behaviour is having a negative effect on the work of the agency”
(IASCE, 2012, p.2).

It is important to note these guidelines do not represent nationally agreed policies. IASCE's Practice Placement Manual (2013, p.24) leaves identifying placement learning, judgments about unsatisfactory practice and protocols associated with assessing placement learning to the discretion of the college with which the student is registered. In the absence of nationally agreed placement-learning objectives, practice standards, or assessment protocols, placement-based learning and regulation can be localised and (possibly) fragmented within Irish social care.

In the four-decade history of social care education (Courtney, 2012), learning experiences associated with social care placement has received limited research attention. Byrne (2000) identified the opportunity which placement provides for students to gain a deeper understanding of theory and for learning to use theory to understand service user's lives and to guide practice interventions (pp.100 -105). Doyle and Lalor (2013) present two vignettes based on students' experience of placement and briefly outlines the benefit of placement for professional development. Byrne-Lancaster, (2014, p.227) drew on a focus group undertaken with ten students who had completed the mandatory 800 hours of practice based placement. Students found placement helpful for learning to use theory in practice and gaining professional confidence. Key areas of learning for participants were self-care, regulating emotional reaction to clients' life circumstance, boundaries, and time-management. While the IASCE Practice Placement Manual (2013, p.5 and 13-17) infers engagement in practice and supervision as pedagogical activities associated with professional learning, obscurity remains regarding the type or complexity of practice that is suitable for students at different stages of study. The main support structure for on placement learning discussed in the manual is supervision. Obstacles to placement learning receive limited discussion in the manual under 'trouble-shooting' (p.19).

Lack of research into social care practice learning, compelled me to use insights into learning social work practice learning as a starting point. Social Work is a field of

practice allied to social care, although differences in role, function, and legal responsibility exist. Differences also exist in their educational pathways. Social care education in Ireland is accessed mainly in Institutes of Technology at undergraduate level with social work education involves postgraduate education in the university sector. Entry into the post-graduate programme requires a BA (Hons) in Social Science or equivalent. Learners undertaking post-graduate education may have more experience using higher-order thinking skills than undergraduate learners, and may be able to use these skills to advance placement based learning. Löfmark, Morbeg, Öhlund, and Ilicki (2008), Share (2009) and Trevithick (2012) have drawn comparison between social work and social care work education. Both professions draw from a similar theory base and use placement-based learning to inculcate professional values, role, and skills. For most social work and social care learners, placement is their first experience of learning to practice in a professional way. Consequently, using the social work learning models as a point of reference from which to explore social care practice learning has some justification.

Connecting threshold concepts with placement-based learning

Although, Meyer and Land, (2006) considers a threshold concept to be 'akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking' (p. 3) they also suggest that it may have a 'performance element' (p.7). Considered transformative, threshold concepts change the learner's perspective of a discipline and once achieved the learning is irreversible. Even though the threshold has proven troublesome, it 'exposes the previously hidden interrelatedness' (p.7) of discipline knowledge, thereby facilitating the learner's ability integrate knowledge in a way that was previously impossible. For disciplines, such as social care who are building a body of knowledge, threshold concepts can be associated with 'ways of thinking and practising' (p.15).

The possibility of accessing 'ways of practising' and 'ways of learning how to practice' is of interest to me since much of my role is supporting professional practice development of social care students. As a situated learning experience (Lave and Wagner, 1991) placement involves participation in an authentic social care environment under the supervision, guidance or mentoring of an experienced worker. In essence, placement is

a time when students learn how to practice as a worker, but elusive is how this learning happens.

Often occupational performance is ascribed tacit quality, learned by assimilation at the elbows of experts. This prevalent view has 'helped to avoid the issue of how to develop a clinical pedagogy that helps students to develop appropriate links between theory and practice and a trajectory toward expertise' (Kinchin, Cabot & Hay, 2010, p.81). They purport un-articulated 'links between chains of practice and underlying network of understanding' (p.87) rather than in-articulable tacit knowledge (Eraut, 2000, p.127-128) as the base of professional intuition. Re-conceptualising expertise as un-articulate knowledge rather than non-articulable knowledge will encourage educators to use pedagogy to develop student's ability to articulate links between practice and theory and theory and practice: a key skill associated with an evidence-based practice environment. What is less discussed are the processes associated with learning to practice within a discipline. Billett (2011, p.20) suggests there are pedagogical practices and teaching opportunities within the activity of each discipline. In their research into professional transformation associated with mentoring probationary teachers and teaching itself, Cove, McAdam and McGonigan (2008, p.198) pose an important question relating to learning professional practice – what crucially transformative or integrative 'threshold points' do students recognise and cross. Analysis of focus group discussions and on-line questionnaires lead Cove et al (2008) to identify ten threshold-points related to job performance, role, and identity.

Constructing placement as a liminal experience (Perkins, 2006, p.36) where an occupations way of practising is encountered, can refocus Irish social care educators attention on the need for specific learning tasks and points to be embedded into placement and allow placement to live up to the signature pedagogy status it has been afforded (Wayne, Raskin & Bogo, 2010). However, since social care student learning on placement has received such limited research attention the outcomes of placement-based learning in the Irish context may lack consistency. Pedagogical practices and opportunities used and created by supervisors are (most likely) based on experiential knowledge of learning practice or teaching practice or techniques acquired from IASCE's (2006) three-day 'Student Supervision' course, but again this is a research gap in Irish social care. The following two sections, aims to illuminate one part of the puzzle

associated with helping students become practitioners - what are students learning on placement.

Over-view of three models of social work professional development

While discussing education for professional learning, Doel and Shardlow (2009, p.9) credit Reynolds (1942) with pre-dating Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) as a 'novice to expert' stage model in social work. Alexander (1986, p.235) described Reynolds (1942) stages of professional development as a 'lucid and relevant framework for teachers and students [of social work] to consider' (p.235). Drawing on 17 years of experience as a social work educator, Reynolds's (1942) model captures the main perspective changes and challenges encountered when social work students and practitioners thinking about and do social work. The five stages of the Reynolds (1942) model are Stage I: Acute consciousness of self; Stage II: Sink or swim adaptation; Stage III: Understanding the situation without power to control one's own activity; Stage IV: Relative mastery and Stage V: Learning to teach what one has mastered. Graduation occurs in Stage III: Understanding the situation without power to control one's own activity (Reynolds, 1942, p.80), therefore only the first three stages of the model were analysed for pre-graduate learning thresholds. To summarise Reynolds (1942), learning in the first three stages of professional development is associated with suitability to the profession (Stage I: Acute consciousness of self, p.75). Role taking and role performance, personal growth and development and using social work knowledge to inform practice are associated with Stage II: Sink or swim adaptation (p.77 - 78). Evaluating and controlling professional practice actions (Stage III: Understanding the situation without power to control one's own activity, p.79 - 80) is the final aspect of learning achieved prior to graduation.

Saari (1981; 1989/2012) articulated processes associated with learning social work practice based on Reynolds (1942) model. Doctoral research undertaken by Platt (1992) validated the usefulness of Saari's (1989) model in delineating first and second year social work student learning. Deal (2000 and 2002) use Saari's (1989) model to explore the utility of a stage based approach with social work students. Retaining Reynolds (1942) five-stage model to professional development, Saari (2012) contends that learners reconstruct their understanding of 'what helps' people who require professional intervention and seek the answers to four questions: Am I right for the

profession? (p. 233), Is this the right profession for me? (p.237); Does any of this have real meaning? (p.237) and How do I improve my effectiveness? (p.240). Learners can get a fleeting sense of Stage IV: Reliving helps prior to graduation (p.237), consequently, Stage I: Caring helps, Stage II: Talking helps and Stage III: Understanding helps and Stage IV: Reliving helps were analysed for pre-graduation learning. Stage V: Re-organising helps was not included in the analysis. The focus of pre-graduation for Saari (2012) was for learner's uncertainty about the match between them and social work as an occupation to be resolved (Stage I: Caring helps and Stage II: Talking helps, p.233 - 234). Understand the meaning of social work (Stage III: Understanding helps, p.237) and explore ways of improving practice effectiveness (Stage IV: Reliving helps, p.239) are also areas of learning within Saari's (2012) model. Changing the construction of what helps service users from caring, to talking, to understanding. Some pre-graduate learners getting a fleeting sense of reliving helps. This learning occurs across all stages of pre-graduate learning (Stage I: Caring helps, Stage II: Talking helps, Stage III: Understanding helps, and Stage IV: Reliving helps p. 233 – 239).

Holman and Freed (1987) also referred to Reynolds's model (1942) in their research into social work professional development from entry into social work education to practice as a master. Learning is mapped in a seven stage model: Stage I: Precursor (p.11), Stage II: Reacting (p.12), Stage III: Experimenting (p.14), Stage IV: Consolidating (p.15), Stage V: Broadening (p.15), Stage VI: Reconstructing (p.16) and Stage VII: Mastery (p.17). Piaget's (1952) cognitive processes of assimilation and accommodation and Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, and Krathwohl's (1956) cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains of the intellectual framework inform the model. The point of graduation is not specifically identified in the model, however in the description of Stage V: Broadening, Holman and Freed (1987) earners are considered to have 'achieved a level of independent practice and is likely to be in a supervisory position' (p.16). Consequently, Stage IV: Consolidation is accepted as the point of graduation and analysis focused on learning associated with the first four stages the model. Resolving initial anxiety about performance and suitability (Stage I: Precursor, p.11) allows learners to focus on developing social work skills and using social work knowledge to understand service users lives and guide practice (Stage II: Reacting (p.12), Stage III: Experimenting (p.14), Stage IV: Consolidating (p.15).

Thresholds of pre-graduation learning

Thematic analysis of Reynolds’s (1942), Saari’s (1981, 1989/2012) and Holman and Freed’s (1987) suggestions about pre-graduation stages, generated five areas of learning associated with professional practice placements:

- suitability to the profession
- personal awareness and development
- awareness of professional role
- mobilise theory
- question the effectiveness of practice

To me these areas act as learning thresholds. I use the term ‘threshold’ mindfully, reflecting the essence of Meyer and Land’s (2008) threshold concepts in terms of the transformative, irreversible, and integrative nature of this learning, but bounded in terms of role identification and performance. Learners realise their professional role, thereby generate boundaries of the profession. I consider the learning thresholds as sequential and interdependent. Crossing early thresholds extends the possibility of encountering later threshold areas and encountering later thresholds deepen students understanding of earlier thresholds. Table 1 visualises the five learning thresholds encountered in first and second placement.

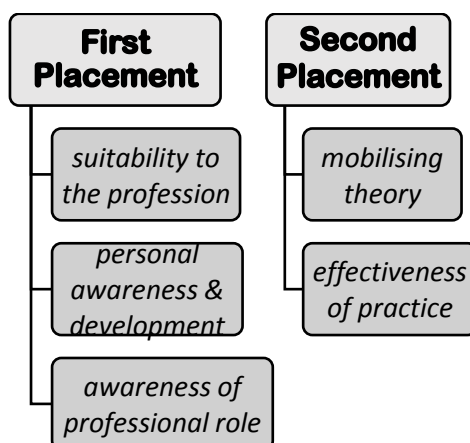


Table 1: Learning thresholds aligned with placement experience

Using Saari's (2012) Stage III: Understanding helps (p.237) as a timeline indicator, it is more likely for students to encounter learning thresholds; suitability to the profession, personal awareness and development, and awareness of professional role during their first placement experience. Whereas, mobilising theory and effectiveness of practice are more likely to be thresholds encountered during second placement experience.

Suitability to the profession

Suitability to the profession is concerned with the learner's disposition to work as a social worker. In each model (Reynolds, 1942, p.75; Saari, 2012, p.233; and Holman and Freed, 1987, p.11) learners question their suitability to the profession of social work. Reynolds (1942) spoke of learners pondering suitability and overcoming their sense of inadequacy for the profession (p.75), a process described by Saari (2012) as learners seeking an answer to the question 'Am I right for the profession?' (p.233). Holman and Freed (1987) note that overcoming feelings of 'anxiety' (p.11) 'inadequacy' (p.12) to work in the field is part of initial learning. If anxiety about professional suitability is not resolved, learners are in danger of withdrawing from the course (Reynolds, 1942, p.76; Holman and Freed, 1987, p.12).

Personal awareness & growth

In the process of questioning their suitability to the profession, Reynolds (1942, p.78) suggested learners growing awareness of how their current behaviour and perceptions may not be aligned to the values of social work. Reynolds (1942) also highlighted how learner's fear of feedback may hinder their ability to take on and utilise feedback about ways to improve their practice (p.78). For Reynolds (1942) such insights 'may require learners to engage in personal development' or 'seek some other form of work' (p.78).

Awareness of professional role

As learners ponder their suitability to the profession, they become aware of the scope and intent of the professional social work role (Reynolds, 1942, p.77; Saari 2012, p.234; Holman and Freed, 1987, p.13). Awareness of role is not only associated with understanding 'what to do and what to say' (Holman & Freed, 1987, pp.12 and 13) in practice situations but also with understanding the professional purpose of contact with

service users (Saari, 2012, pp.233 - 239). Developing controlled emotional involvement with service users and their life circumstance (Holman and Freed, 1987, p.15) indicates acceptance of the social work role and one of its boundaries. None of the authors (Reynolds, 1942; Saari, 2012; Holman and Freed, 1987) suggested that learners gain insight into professional role through practice, feedback from educators, (Reynolds, 1942, p.77 - 78; Saari, 2012, p. 233, 235; Holman and Freed, 1987, p.12 - 13), service users (Saari, 2012, p.238) and peers (Saari, 2012, p.237) rather than explicit instruction. Repeatable actions are those that gain positive feedback (Reynolds, 1942. p.76; Holman and Freed, 1987, p.13) alternatively; actions receiving negative feedback are not repeated (Holman and Freed, 1987, p.13). For Saari (2012) learners encountering a 'disillusionment crisis' (p.234) triggers role awareness. Created by the necessity to use professional skills and knowledge rather than general care skills (p.233) the disillusionment crisis causes learners to question what their role in helping service users is.

Mobilising theory for practice

The process of learning to use theory in professional practice is evident in each of the models (Reynolds, 1942, p.77 and 80; Saari, 2012, p.238; Holman & Freed, 1987, p.13). Holman and Freed (1987) suggested some learners ignore theory altogether (p.14) but others 'are pulled toward mastery of theory' (p.14). Saari (2012) also notes this dichotomy and makes a distinction between 'insight-orientated' learners, (those pulled toward a mastery of theory p.238) and 'affectively-orientated' learners, (those who ostensibly ignore theory, but label every emotion, p.238). Mobilising theory for practice involves learners understanding theory (Saari, 2012, p.238) and linking it correctly to practice situations. Other features of mobilising theory for practice are using theory to understand client's life circumstance (Saari, 2012, p.238) and to guide practice interventions (Reynolds, 1942, p.77; Saari, 2012, pp.236 and 238; Holman and Freed, 1987, p.13).

Effectiveness of practice

Understanding the impact of practice on service users is the fifth learning threshold that can arise prior to graduation. While learners in the early stages of learning practice tend to be 'responsive to environmental demands' (Holman and Freed, 1987, p.12)

learners in later stages becoming more 'attuned ... [with service user's] meaning systems' (Saari, 2012, p.238). Learners have become more empathetic with service users (Holman and Freed, 1987, p.14) which helps them think more the impact of their practice (Saari, 2012, p.238; Holman and Freed, 1987, p.14). Reynolds (1942) suggests that acknowledging the limits of practice interventions without loss of confidence (p.80) is an important step in the professional task of questioning the effectiveness of practice. When service user needs and 'meanings' (Saari, 2012, p.238) are taken as the starting point for practice, improved outcomes of practice for service users can occur.

Conclusion

It appears from learning embedded in models of expertise (Reynolds, 1942; Saari, 1981, 1989/2012 and Holman and Freed, 1987) placement-based learning has the potential to act as a liminal experience where identity is reconstituted, from a layperson studying a discipline to a practitioner within an occupation. Placement-based learning appears to have opportunities to transform theory from a body of knowledge to an 'insight lens' offering ways of understanding service user's lives, their needs and provides a guide for intervention. By seeing theory use in these three ways, the integrative potential of placement-based learning is great. It is difficult to imagine this insight and identity development to be reversible. There is no doubt that placement-based learning can be troublesome, creating anxiety and concern about suitability, performance ability and practice effectiveness. However, if one wants to learn to play on the field, one must be in the field. Primary research into placement-based learning will allow student narrative of learning to enrich educators and mentors ability to support them in them as they encounter threshold-learning experiences.

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