Self-Awareness and Personal Development in Social Work Education – A Pilot Programme of Experiential Workshops

Roxana Anghel (Roxana.Anghel@anglia.ac.uk)
Debbie Amas Deborah.Amas@anglia.ac.uk
Judy Hicks (Judy.Hicks@anglia.ac.uk)
Social Work and Social Policy Department, Faculty of Health and Social Care

Abstract

This article describes a pilot programme of workshops designed to support year one BA (Hons) Social Work students to learn experientially skills and knowledge essential to social work practice. The programme offered a safe and creative space in which students explored abstract concepts such as uncertainty, empathy and resilience. The programme’s ultimate aim was to provide a catalyst for the development of professional resilience and for deep learning.

The inquiry following the death of Victoria Climbié (and later that of Baby Peter) revealed that the failures of staff to record or report serious concerns relate closely to the impact on practitioners of the emotional content of work with children and families. Recent literature asserts the importance of practitioners developing skills in self reflection and emotional resilience in addition to those necessary for achievement of competence.

This programme responds to recent calls for and recommendations to remodel social work education to prepare practitioners more adequately for the complexity of their practice. The evaluation shows that the programme has a positive transformative effect having the potential to increase students’ self-awareness, confidence, and empathy.
Introduction
Reports following the tragic deaths of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003) and Baby Peter (Laming, 2009) have urged a remodelling of Social Work education. The findings of these inquiries have highlighted that social workers (particularly Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) in the field of child and family work) appear to be insufficiently prepared for coping with the complexity and unpredictability of clients and of the social reality within which they operate. In particular, Laming (2009) recommended that social work education should ensure that students are supported in developing emotional resilience, and the ability to reflect on and analyse what they are seeing (p.52). Following from this report, the Social Work Task Force (2009) suggests that future NQSWs need to be prepared for managing conflict, hostility and challenge and to develop risk and stress management skills and reflective practice (pp.22, 26).

The purpose of the present programme was to prepare students for professional practice by offering them space and support towards personal development through self-awareness. Using non-traditional creative methods of facilitation and learning, the programme supported a small group of year one Social Work undergraduate students to explore and understand three sets of abstract concepts, core to social work practice:

- Uncertainty/risk/fear
- Empathy/self-awareness
- Resilience/strengths

The programme, incorporating a series of five workshops, was facilitated by two Social Work senior lecturers with extensive expertise in group facilitation and creative work (Judy Hicks and Debbie Amas). As methods we used experiential learning, individual and group reflection, and creative media (drama, painting, sand tray, movement). Seven students have volunteered to participate, all female, aged 18-50, with no disabilities, 4 of Black or other ethnic origin. They were motivated to participate either by a desire to use creative methods and to explore themselves, or by curiosity.

The evaluation of the programme (by Roxana Anghel) shows that the programme has the potential to increase students’ self-awareness, confidence and learning about complex practice-relevant social work concepts by using their imagination and by reflecting on self and on their personal biographies.

Background
Uncertainty, fear and risk are core to social work practice, especially in the field of child and family work. In the notorious case of Victoria Climbié’s death, Laming (2003) suggested that one of the main causes for the tragedy was that the professionals acted as if ‘paralysed’ and failed to ‘do the simple things properly’ (p.105) and to engage the child. He suggested that this could be prevented in future through a more thorough regulation of practice and through better information-sharing among professionals and agencies. Other analysts, however, emphasised unconscious processes that social workers experience during their interaction with clients. Balen and Masson (2008), reviewing articles analysing the Climbié case, found that some of the explanations for the outcome and the behaviour of the professionals were around counter-transference, inability to cope with aggression and overpowering clients, fear for personal and family safety causing a ‘captive’ psychology, and feelings of disgust that remain unacknowledged.
To cope with such difficulties in practice social workers need to become aware of those unconscious processes and to develop emotional resilience (Howe, 2008; Laming, 2009), a high degree of tolerance to working with uncertainty (Stevens & Cox, 2008) and adequate coping styles (Collins, 2008; Ferguson, 2005). Contributors to the debate advocate a return to relationship-based (Ruch, 2000) and to psycho-dynamically aware practice and supervision (Ferguson, 2005).

The present programme has included a mix of experiential techniques, individual and group reflection and creative mediums to explore the three sets of concepts. Research on experiential learning found that individuals who learn by balancing experiencing and conceptualising are more flexible in adapting to situations and have an increased ability to develop both analytic and interpersonal skills (Mainemelis et al., 2002).

Ruch’s (2000) work on reflection in social work practice found that it facilitates empathy and it supports insights into how the personal background affects learning and practice, and how the emotional content of the interactions between social worker and client affects the worker. The use of reflection develops also the professional use of ‘self’ and it equips the worker with skills to contain anxiety. Freire’s concept of praxis illustrates the crucial importance of acquiring a balance between reflection and action, the two informing each other, while if any is sacrificed the other would suffer.

Work done by Simons and Hicks (2006) and Amas (2007) shows that using creative mediums in training and education enhance confidence, self-efficacy and self-image; enable trust and deep learning; and develop creativity and imagination, which are central to problem-solving and coping.

**Programme Format and Content**

The creative media used in this programme included drawing, music, movement, costume props and masks, a sand tray and symbolic objects. Students used a personal diary in which they wrote their reflection at the end of each workshop. They were usually asked to think of four learning points they would take away from each workshop.

The programme was located in a local community centre, separate from the University environment. This has been deliberate to convey the idea of a safe, personal space, with which the students could feel ownership, and which would be more conducive to trust and self-exploration (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. An equidistant, enjoyable space in the community**

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Although it had clear didactic purpose, the programme has not been organised around strict learning outcomes and assessment due to the personal nature of the work, which, at this point, we saw as open-ended in terms of learning outcomes.

The programme contained five three-hour workshops. Four of these explored the sets of concepts that the programme focused on, while the fifth focused on programme evaluation. The programme has been recorded through non-participant observation and photography (with the participants’ permission).

Each workshop began with an introduction to the session, followed by warm-up activities, a set of creative activities, group discussion and ended through personal reflection using the diary (Figure 2). The warm-up exercises, which were interactive and engaged the whole body, helped the students to focus and helped create group cohesion.

**Figure 2. A space for group and individual reflection**

![Image of a space for group and individual reflection](image1.jpg)

**Workshop 1:** Using methods such as visualisation, symbolic painting, and small group drama the students explored individually and in-group the strengths that brought them to social work. This was the session in which the group was formed, so the focus was also on getting to know each other and on learning to work together (Figure 3).

![Image of students engaging in workshop activities](image2.jpg)

**Figure 3. Illustrating compassion, care and advocacy**
Workshop 2: Beginning from a classic story narrated by the facilitator and then using costume role play the students explored their own experience of responding to fear, risk, and uncertainty, and what in themselves and in their environment helped them overcome those odds, and cope (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Exploring uncertainty, risk, and strength in personal biography

Workshop 3 explored empathy and self awareness through individual, pair and group activities using movement and music. In this session, students experienced and explored interpersonal issues such as trust, power and control, non-verbal communication and awareness, rhythm and non-verbal collaboration (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Having fun while communicating non-verbally

Workshop 4: Using a sand tray and symbolic objects, the session explored personal journeys of resilience and meaning. The picture in Figure 6 illustrates a student’s journey from her country of origin, through a series of obstacles, to the UK and her current life and professional training. She is represented by the two figures at both ends of the tray, while one of the major obstacles which challenged her is represented by the tiger. At her destination she is facing a mirror in which her journey is reflected. This scene represents her self-exploration and learning by reflecting on her life experience that demonstrated her
strength in persevering and overcoming adversity. The treasure chest represents her learning and her future in the social work profession.

Figure 6. A journey to social work

Workshop 5: The fifth session focused on evaluation and on closure. The closure was done through a collective creative piece (Figure 7), which brought together the symbols with which each participant (including the facilitators) represented their views on the programme and its impact on their learning.

Figure 7. The creative closure of the programme

Throughout the programme, student participation varied due to a number of practical factors, such as timetabling and the distance between the sessions.

Programme Evaluation
The evaluation focused on process evaluation having an illuminative and formative role for future development (Gray, 2004). It also looked at the programme’s impact as reported by students. The evaluation used a one-cycle action research design, using methods such as non-participant observation, facilitator debrief after each session, and end-of-programme focus group. Data was analysed through thematic analysis.

Findings
The analysis of the focus group found that the students perceived the format of the programme – group workshop using creative experiential methods – as enabling democratic interaction, and as facilitating communication. The students felt that the informal, active and interactive approach to working together helped them develop trust and openness, and made them feel connected. Thus, this format facilitated group cohesion, authenticity and an atmosphere conducive to participation and learning.

“We are involved here – in seminar we only sit and talk – here we are able to connect with each other”
“The creative [format] has an impact on how the group behaves – in seminar we sometimes have clashes because of strong feelings but here, you explore yourself and you feel more relaxed”

(Student 4)

The group format gave the students a space to express themselves. The dialogue, the observation of self and others, and the active interaction and feedback from others enabled them to learn about themselves, and to be empathic. A student referred to the transformative effect that the work had on her, enabling her to reframe an internal trait that caused her anxiety in the past into a strength.

“I experienced some discomfort within myself – in a group I always wanted to be a leader. I don’t necessarily have to be the leader – I have to be someone who is helping carrying it forward. I think being here taught me that – I see myself differently in a team now, more positively – I don’t react to it as I used to, saying ‘oh that’s really bad!’. I can see that it’s not the leading bit that’s important, it’s the getting it done”

(Student 2)

The students gave positive feedback particularly about the use of movement. They felt that the exercises at the beginning of each session relaxed them but at the same time boosted their energy and enabled them to concentrate.

“Movement relaxes you…it unlocks you and it gives you a relaxed mind to think”

(Student 3)

The experiential approach, overall, has been very powerful in helping students understand the meaning of abstract concepts, and explore their interlinking, and practical application and impact.

“The exercise about the garden was very powerful because that’s when I felt I understand how to reflect. I had a very strong contact with my thoughts”

(Student 1)

Students also showed insight into some of the emotional content of service user experience, and into the impact of social worker intervention. It made them realise how inadvertently social workers could be patronising instead of insightful.

“It’s more real – you realise the implications of things because you learn about their impact”

(Student 3)

“It can be patronising – to imagine how it’s like and say ‘I understand’. I can imagine much deeper by putting myself in their shoes”

(Student 2)

Through their work together the students felt they gained an insight into how trust builds. Some felt that they developed trust in the process, in others, and in themselves and their inner ability to judge situations and boundaries.

“…trust my instincts, you can be too trusting – so it’s also about trusting yourself”

(Student 4)
One of the most important outcomes of the work students did in this programme was their ability to relate the exploratory and symbolic work on the three sets of concepts to concrete situations in practice. One student talks about how becoming aware of her strengths increased her confidence in practice.

“I learned to take risks… I was anxious about whether I was going to be able to do it (the observation placement), how is it going to be… then I remembered – well I have the ability to do it, to take risks, to go through with all. I got this from here”

(Student 1)

The choice of offering this programme in the first year proved appropriate, as students felt that it helped them adjust to the academic requirements, retain the learning for longer, and it gave them an early awareness of the complexity of the profession and the commitment it required.

“For me personally the whole experience of first year it’s a bit too much, so a different approach to learning has helped – things I couldn’t understand well in class, I can now – talking about reflection theoretically in class – I just had that experience here – and you don’t forget it”

(Student 3)

“You go in this job which will involve all your life, it’s not just a job – and in a very Western way we only concentrate on the theoretical part of it, and nothing else and I think that this is what you’ve addressed here” [i.e. holistic learning]

(Student 2)

Conclusions and Implications
Academic debates in the aftermath of the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Baby Peter point to the fact that currently there is an unreasonable emphasis put on regulations and technical competencies. Too little attention is given to the exploration of emotions and to the development of personal and professional coping skills to help social workers cope with the uncertainty inherent to their practice. Imminent remodelling of social work education will require social work programmes to address this and to provide opportunities for students to develop emotional resilience, stress and risk management skills, as well as reflective skills.

This programme has developed a model of training in which self-exploration, reflection, movement, drama and other creative mediums are centrally used to encourage the development of empathy, personal awareness, and deep learning of abstract concepts. The appropriateness of the methods was demonstrated by the evaluation, which also found that the programme improved the students’ self-awareness, self-efficacy and learning. Through the holistic approach to learning, the programme could thus be very valuable as a bridge between theory/abstract concepts and practice/application.

The programme requires delivery on a larger scale, and outcomes evaluation to acquire reliable evidence of its impact and benefits. Further research should also look at its impact on student retention, which might be positively affected by the personal relevance of the self-exploration aspect of the programme.
The programme and the evaluation have been disseminated at the Learning and Teaching (L&T) FHSC Seminar and at the INSPIRE showcasing event. In July 2009 we also disseminated our work at the Joint Social Work Education Conference to an international audience of social work academics and service users. This opened opportunities for inter-university collaboration, and we are in correspondence with Prof. Harry Ferguson from the University of Nottingham, one of the lead advocates of the need for social work education to include the exploration of emotions. Finally, the programme has been presented to the FHSC L&T Associate Dean, who is supporting its development as consultancy to practice and inter-professional training. More dissemination is planned through a peer-reviewed article and conference presentations.

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References


