

# LEARNING METHODS – FOCUS ON REFLECTIVE LEARNING

## Reflective learning

Social work is a practical profession, and the competence needed for a social worker is developed through practical and personal training in different working situations where learning takes place. Learning is always the main focus in building new and better competence. A crucial question may then be: What is learning? There are different theories, viewpoints and learning methods on how to learn. In this chapter, some examples of learning methods with a focus on the experiential and reflective approach are presented.

In experiential learning, we combine action, experience and personal reflections on these experiences. We may say that experiential learning is a holistic “learning by doing” approach, taking both the cognitive, emotional, personal and social dimensions into consideration. Experiential learning is a process whereby students “learn by doing” and by *reflecting personally* on this experience.

We may also ask why a focus on the student’s own experience and reflections are important in the learning process. Roger links the concept of experiential learning to *meaningful* learning, emphasizing that essential characteristics of meaningful learning are *personal involvement* in the whole learning process (Bjerknes, 2002, p. 7).

The importance of reflecting on what you are doing – reflected practical training – as part of the learning process, has been emphasized by many investigators. Schøn (1983) suggested that the capacity to reflect on action in a process of continuous learning is necessary in carrying out a professional practice and the main characteristic of a “reflective practitioner”.

The capacity to reflect *in* action, while doing something, and *on* action, after you have done it, has become an important part of professional training in many disciplines, like teacher training and different health and social work professions (for more about reflection in the learning process see Schøn, D. 1983, Kolb, D.A. (1984), Jarvis, P. 1995).

Grendstad uses the concept *learning by discovery* in his book of the same title. To discover is to see or be aware of something that has been there all the time, only that you have not noticed it before. Or you can all of a sudden discover new sides or perspectives of things you are familiar with. When you learn by discovery, you discover or experience a new meaning with something. Sometimes this also means that you

have to let go of some old opinions, knowledge or even feelings, because after the discovery you see things in another way than you did before (Grendstad 1986, pp. 17-21).

This perspective on learning focuses on a person's personal learning history and knowledge development, rather than merely knowledge acquirement, and that a student is able to construct her/his own knowledge and competence on the basis of experience and discovery. According to this view, the personal learning process is considered very important for the learning outcome. A consequence of this is that students in education must be given the opportunity to be active participants in the whole learning process throughout the academic study.

In educational programmes at universities and colleges, experiential learning activities will most often include field exercises and work place practicums. While doing practical work, the student will most often try to make sense of specific experiences in the practical field and connect these experiences with their former experiences and the theoretical framework within academic study. In other words, they try to understand and create meaning in a situation by thinking and reflecting on what is happening in that specific situation.

This experience-based learning method, where the learning takes place in "real" practical work life, may be a "win win" situation. The student gains insight from the practical field useful in different settings, and the academy and the workplaces in the community may build an interactive relationship beneficial for both entities.

## **Practice-based classroom activities**

The ultimate goal of studying is for social work students to apply school-learned knowledge to real-life situations in the work life of social workers. In order to reach this goal, students need to practice, either in real work life or in the classroom, to abstract the meaning from one experience and apply it to the next experience.

If work place or field practice is not a part of the regular study plan at the academy or university, it will still be possible to incorporate some practice- or experiential learning in the academic program. The theory-practice dimension will then be a product of classroom activity. Some examples of theory-practice oriented work inside the classroom, where students' own experiences, discoveries and reflections are central in the learning process are presented in the following section.

### *Discussion-based teaching*

This method is based on the belief that discussions improve students' problem solving skills more effectively than lectures or they supplement the lectures. Students need new information if they are to engage in understanding new topics, and lectures may serve the purpose of providing information. However, in discussion-based teaching, the student will be a much more *active* participant in the search for meaning and

understanding than by passively receiving knowledge delivered by the teacher's lecturing. Some use of dialogue in the classroom often works well because it encourages the student to ask questions, think and comment on the topic, and thus try to make sense or meaning of the subjects.

If the class is very large, there will not be much time for each student to actively participate in the discussions. In such cases, a dialogue will function better if the students are divided into smaller groups for sharing opinions and thoughts and for discussing. The members of the group will not think alike, but will all contribute with their individual understanding. Techniques such as dialogue and skilful discussions make it easier for small groups of students to take a reflective learning orientation and develop their competence together. All the time the intention is that discussion-based teaching will help students to apply ideas and reflect and think critically about what they are learning.

If there are many students and the classroom is an auditorium with no "movable" chairs to organize smaller groups, then a "buzz" group may be useful to activate listening students. Then the teacher just stops lecturing for a little while and asks the student a question for them to discuss and reflect upon for 4-5 minutes. The students discuss with the person sitting next to them, so no one has to move. This short "reflection break" gives the students an opportunity to think, reflect and consider the teacher's question and to share their personal opinions, emotions and social reactions with a fellow student.

After this "reflection break", the teacher may ask if someone wants to share her/his opinions, reflections or feelings with the whole group. If someone wants to – this should be voluntary – the personal reflections shared must be respected by all the others, even if their own experience is somewhat different. The teacher may choose to answer some questions posed by the students or provide some positive responses before continuing the lecture. The students will not only be "kept awake" by this reflection break, but in fact they have to contribute actively and in this way take some responsibility for their own learning process.

Sometimes an *open-circle* may be a useful discussion tool, meaning all participants in a class or smaller group are sitting in chairs in a circle without tables or other barriers between them. This *open-circle* will often make participants feel closer and thus promote a more open dialogue. The student's role should be to talk with one another. The teacher's role will be to set up a structure in which the students can learn together and try to make the class a safe place to raise questions and issues.

Giving value to all voices in the classroom will probably enhance the learning outcome for many students. On the very start of the first planned class discussion, the teacher should emphasize some rules or structure for the conversations in order to promote and support a discussing level of depth and quality. Cambron-McCabe (2000, p. 217) provides some ideas:

*First, we listen intently as others talk – we listen for the meaning others are attempting to share. We may build on another's comment or ask questions about what thinking lies behind the comment.*

*Second, we recognize the importance of silence. Space is needed to reflect on what is being learned.*

*Third, no one interrupts. We let each other finish.*

*Fourth, we don't criticize others comments as "right, stupid, wrong, etc."*

*Fifth, we forbid the phrase 'Yes, but' that labels the comment as invalid. We urge the use of 'Yes, and' which values the previous comment.*

Hopefully these ideas will help make the class-room safe and accepting and help students listen to and learn from each other. As one foreign student wrote in a reflection note:

*Class discussions gave me a very good background for my future knowledge. The first and most important reason is that we had the opportunity to share our experiences and learn a lot from each other (from one reflection note at HiAk, spring 2010).*

Another student put it this way:

*One group discussion that we held in class is one of my best memories from Norway in terms of the curricula. Students and teachers express their knowledge regarding a subject and help each other understand specific things by sharing information, in this way they even get the possibility to shift one's opinion in a field, enriching their knowledge. I must personally admit that I have learned how to express myself without being embarrassed about what I think, to approve or disapprove of someone's opinion when I have the right arguments, to listen to other points of view and even change mine if these seem more pertinent (from a reflection note at HiAk, spring 2010).*

This note shows part of an interesting learning story. The student has gained self-confidence in expressing herself in the group. She also shows self-development – and courage – by changing opinions. But she does not change opinions just by listening to others, but listening is a way of getting to know other points of view that in some cases seem more pertinent. It looks like she has discovered or experienced something new by listening to others. In this way, she has further developed her own knowledge.

## Case

In working with cases in the classroom, it is convenient to divide students into smaller groups and give them a case for discussion, then sum up and comment in plenum afterwards. One case example:

*As a social worker you are going to the home of a single mother, Maria. She lives in a two-room apartment with her two children, a boy of eight years and a girl of three years. The mother had a part-time job in a local shop, but now she is unemployed. One neighbor of Maria's has phoned the school and told the boy's teacher that both children sometimes have been seen out in the streets late in the evenings looking for their mother. The teacher became worried and phoned you. The teacher also told you that the boy usually comes to school in the*

*morning, but he often says that he does not want to go home. He prefers staying at the school. As far as the neighbor knows, the girl has some difficulties with her eyesight. You visit the home to see if there is something you can do to help the family.*

There may be many questions to discuss, for example:

- *What do you know, what are the facts in the story?*
- *What do you **think** you know?*
- *What would you **like** to know to be able to give some help or support?*
- *How will you get this information? Which questions will you ask which persons?*
- *How will you prepare yourself for this home visit?*
- *Who will you contact for advice or supervision?*

Answering these questions, the student needs to discriminate between facts and hypothesis. Sometimes it is easy to jump to a conclusion too early. If so, the support to the family will not be based on what the family members really need, but what you *think* they need based on a wrong interpretation of the problem.

Teachers may make different cases for different purposes and ask questions relevant to what problems the students are supposed to be discussing and solving.

### *Learning logs*

A log is a short written text (2-3 pages) created after one lecture or one day at the academy/university:

- Describe the activities during the lecture or some of the activities during the day.
- What are your thoughts/reflections about the activities you have described?
- What did you get out of the unit? What did you learn?
- Which topics did you find most interesting? Which did you find least interesting? Do you know why you think as you do?
- Write down whatever comes to mind.
- What were/are your feelings connected to the activities described? Meaning: did you/ do you feel happy, sad, depressed, and angry or do you have any other feeling for something said or done by someone during the lecture/unit/activity? What do these feelings tell you about your own reactions? Is this some learning that may be useful to you as a social worker? If yes, in what way?

Reasons for using a log as a learning tool:

- for remembering better what you have done;
- for reflecting about what you have done;
- for deepening your knowledge;
- to give room to and put into words the feelings experienced that are connected to what you have done.

Williams' theses (Howe 2002, p. 143) is that "we learn to see a thing by describing it", as descriptions generally help us to organize the way we perceive and understand the world around us. Williams recognizes a clear link between seeing, describing and communicating.

Giving voice to your own thoughts and feelings makes them clearer to yourself and it also makes it easier for you to communicate your understanding to other people. Clear communication is also a basis for good social interaction with other people – with teachers, other students, clients, as well as colleagues in different working situations.

Logs may be part of *your individual reflective study work*. One student writes in her reflection note:

*An interesting and very useful part of learning was writing logs. In my country, we do not have to write them. Honestly saying it was a completely new thing for me. It was a new learning process, to perceive learning as a complex process involving cognitive, affective and social elements. Personally, for me it was a wonderful way to remember and reflect on what we have done in the class. Writing logs gave me a chance to express feelings connected to the lecture and my study work. The logs I wrote also became the basis to write this reflection note. (From a student reflection note at HiAk, spring 2009).*

Logs may also be used as a background for *sharing thoughts and feelings with your fellow students*; either in class or another group activity, and thus contribute to collaborative learning and work.

Many teachers are concerned about how their students will be able to use classroom learning in future working life, and ask themselves: How will I know what my students have learned? Maybe the teacher wants to see if she is *really reaching* every individual student with her teaching, and therefore asks every student to write a log to see what the students are really getting out of being in her/his class. Used in this way, logs are considered a correspondence between the student and teacher in order to improve both the teaching and learning.

As we can see, learning logs may be used in different ways, but the main thing is that each log is a unique record of the learner's thinking, reflection, feeling and learning. *Logs are personalized learning resource* for each learner/student, as the student records her different responses to learning challenges. The learning log is the student's own commentary upon the personal learning and study. Writing logs may help the student to increase reflection and become more aware of one's own thinking, feeling and behavior, and thus gain more insight. This process may develop each student to become a more independent learner.

## Reflection note

The reflection note may be an essential part of the learning process. It is used to encourage reflection and learning in order to develop knowledge and improve skill and behavior. The reflection note may look simple, but – just like logs – it encourages

awareness and explores emotional issues in the learning process. This will help the student take responsibility for a personal learning process and also may be a personal learning plan.

To write a reflection note you will need to reflect thoroughly on your own learning process and consider how this process has contributed to your own and others' knowledge. Useful aspects may be, for instance:

#### Describe and assess:

- Your expectations and goals for the programme/course and the extent to which these are achieved.
- Teaching and learning methods used and the learning outcome these have provided.
- What you did yourself to fulfill your expectations for the programme/course.
- What your teacher did to fulfill your expectations for the programme/course.
- What you learned from your fellow students.
- How the outcomes will help you in future studies or social work situations.
- Thinking back: what, if anything, could have been done differently.
- How you will work further to improve your own competence as a social worker (Reflection notes are being used for some classes at HiAk, Norway).

The reflection note may be used as a learning tool for the individual student, helping her to think and feel about understanding in a more personal way. A foreign student studying at HiAk, Norway writes in her reflection note:

*I must say that teachers are quite open-minded as they encourage you (the student) to express your opinions and feelings without inhibiting any one or making them feel judged in any given situation. For me, this is a very important part of learning as it speeds the whole knowledge accumulating procedure.*

(From a reflection note 2010).

The reflection note may also be discussed in smaller student groups, as a "sharing of experience" activity. This sharing must be introduced as an *invitation* to the student to read the note out loud or just to tell the others in the group what was written in the personal note. In this way, each student must take responsibility for accepting the invitation by saying "yes", or refusing by saying "no" and thereby lose the opportunity to participate. By making this sharing of experience voluntary, the teacher shows everyone respect, and also shows that everyone is responsible for her/his own choices and actions.

The sharing of experiences – regardless of whether we are talking about logs, reflection notes, personal experiences from practical work life, etc.- must always be done with respect for the individual's personal reflections and feelings. Every person must be allowed to explore herself and her learning process without fear of rejection, ridicule or criticism. It must be a ground rule that persons participating in a group setting must feel comfortable enough to take some risks rather than be too frightened to contribute. A warm and non-judgmental atmosphere will make it easier for the student to

share opinions, reflections and feelings, to admit mistakes, or become open to change and learning something new (for more about support and confidence in group work, see Lappen 2002, pp. 80-81).

By sharing the content of a reflection note, the student may also learn something about differences in perceptions, feelings and thinking. Knowledge of differences between people is extremely important in finding the best way to understand and help single persons or groups of marginalized persons who need support.

A reflection note can also be used by the teacher as an assessment tool for the students' learning outcome, maybe together with some other assessments. If using the reflection note as an assessment, the students need to know this before writing the note. How the reflection note is going to be used must be communicated beforehand, because this might influence both the content and the way they will be written.

### *The Classroom Reflective Journal*

Sometimes it is worthwhile to keep an ongoing reflective journal, thinking and reflecting about paper writing (logs, notes etc.), class discussions or any personal reactions you have had to the classroom work. Reflective journals often work well because patterns in reactions and behaviors become visible. If you write in your journal just after class, when your thoughts are fresh, then the journal may be useful in understanding your own learning process. As a student, you may write a classroom reflective journal on your own initiative, using it for your own personal purpose. But teachers may also ask students to write journals. In that case, the journals will be a tool to provide an impression of the personal learning story for each student. If so, it is important that the teacher does not criticize or assess the personal content, but just add her own reflections, ask questions for more reflections and respect confidentiality (for more on reflective journals, see Cambron-McCabe 2000, pp. 229-230).

## **Reflection work after finishing academic studies**

Recording your own learning experiences can provide fresh insights and may also be beneficial when you have finished your studies and start working as a social worker. In such a situation, you may think of one learning experience you have had at work last week or yesterday. It may, for instance, concern a challenging job situation related to helping/supporting a client, or a difficult discussion with a colleague about how to carry out a specific task. After having described this situation in your journal, you can ask yourself the following questions and reflect upon them:

- Did you recognize this situation as a learning experience when the event took place – or just afterwards?
- Reflect on what you have learned from it, or what implications it may have on your practice.



- What did you do as a result of this job experience? Did you discuss it with your colleagues, your employer or maybe your supervisor (if you have one)?
- Did you apply your learning experience in some other situation, or are you planning to?

## Concluding remarks on reflection

If the social work student is to become a “reflective practitioner” (Schön 1984) who reflects on and thereby improves her social work practice, critical reflections must not only be taught or discussed theoretically. Reflecting must be practiced – in the classroom, as well as in the work place – in an atmosphere of acceptance and encouragement, but always within the context of the teacher’s and student’s culture and ethical standards.

One may ask critically if highly reflective students learn more or better than others. Maybe there is no simple answer to this question. But probably reflective students will learn differently, experiencing some kind of deeper reflection about the whole learning process and the learning outcome. This process will develop insight and knowledge useful for problem solving in practical situations and thus make the social work student a more caring and committed worker within the field of working with marginalized groups.

## Ongoing assessment

How can we fairly assess what our students have learned? Every teacher asks this question and they work very hard to come up with fair and just assessment procedures. Assessment and learning methods are closely connected, because the way students are assessed will decide how they do their study work.

If the assessment tools mainly ask students to summarize and explain concrete facts from the lectures and textbooks at the end of the unit or academic year, then the students will use their study time to read, and read over again just trying to remember the text. Lectures and books are of course useful for knowledge about a particular topic or concept, and textbooks will often provide students with information needed to perform new tasks. However, books do not always provide information good enough to *understand* the goals, performance of new tasks and the complexity of situations. They will contribute to meaningful learning and understanding only if the student thinks and reflects about the content and how this can be used in the day-to-day practice as a social worker.

If preparation for work life is the main goal of education and if reflection and understanding is the purpose of an academic and practical study, then the assessment process must contribute to learning during the *whole* academic year, and not merely be an end-of-the-unit test.

In an ongoing assessment, we need to establish assessment criteria and provide feedback. Bondy & Kendall (1998, pp. 79-80) maintain that assessment criteria need to be:

- *relevant*, meaning closely related to the goals for the unit,
- *public*, meaning that everyone in the classroom knows and understands them,
- *clearly articulated*.

Feedback is given students to help them improve their performance and understanding. Feedback can be given written and formally to each student individually, or can be given verbally and informally, such as responding to a student's comment during a class discussion or work in small groups.

Without feedback during the topic, unit or academic year, students have little chance to see what they need to work more on. According to Bondy and Kendall (1995, p. 80) feedback has to, among other things:

- *occur frequently, from the beginning of the unit until the end,*
- *provide students with information about how to improve, not only how they carried out past performances,*
- *come from a variety of perspectives: student reflection on own work (self-assessment), classmates' and teachers' comments.*

It is important to be aware that feedback can encourage or discourage. A good response, or feedback, should be formulated in a positive way in order to give the person an opportunity to learn and maybe also change a person's self-esteem for the better (Lappen, 2002, p. 89–90).

## Portfolios

If the assessment process intends to deepen students' understanding, not to evaluate it, an ongoing assessment must somehow be built into the topic or unit. One example of doing this might be using portfolios, a folder to store a student's work. A portfolio is well known and widely used in creative studies, such as art and design; but a portfolio can also facilitate ongoing assessment in educating social workers. A portfolio may consist of, for instance, logs, reflective notes, reflective journals, case studies and narratives. A portfolio may also contain reports from practice placements, field excursions and exhibitions.

A portfolio includes student work from different times of the academic year. According to Blythe (1998, p. 114) a portfolio in which students collect their own work over long periods of time can be a valuable tool in teaching, learning and ongoing assessment. The portfolio will thus enable the student and also the teacher to review progress by looking at each student's work throughout the whole academic year. Some teachers using portfolios as an assessment ask their students to review their portfolios at certain times during the academic year and write a reflection piece on their own learning process and progress. This reflection piece will demonstrate not only the final learning product, but also how their understanding has gradually developed. At Akershus University College, the portfolio

is used as a final assessment of some academic modules, sometimes together with an oral examination.

## Closing remarks

Social workers function within an interesting and difficult area. It is complicated to meet the needs of different marginalized people and support them in a successful way. Therefore, the education of social workers should provide opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and ethical standards necessary to carry out their work in the practical field. A good practitioner has to seek information, think and reflect on it to be able to find the best possible solution in different practical work situations. Social workers do not always have a mentor to guide their decisions at work; they need to rely on themselves. Academic study should therefore try to empower students both personally and professionally for their out-of-academy activity and work.

This chapter has emphasized a methodological teaching approach focused on reflective learning, providing examples and discussing different classroom activities that may be useful in educating social workers. A process-oriented thinking underpins these examples, where both the learning process and the learning outcome are regarded as important in constructing the learner's personal knowledge and competence.

Sometimes teachers feel trapped between standardized curriculum and their own wish to use a variety of teaching and assessment procedures. We all have to work within some regulations and frameworks set by authorities. Within these standards, there might somehow still be possibilities for small changes and for utilizing different educational methods. The teachers themselves are the ones to see in what way and to what extent some ideas and examples in this chapter can be implemented in their own teaching and assessing.

As educators or professors, we cannot teach another person directly how to become a good social worker. What we *can* do is to *facilitate her/his learning process* by creating different situations where experiencing, discovering, feeling and reflecting will be possible. We surely all agree that the social work students through their education are preparing themselves for difficult and challenging work with marginalized groups in the community. Therefore, they need to be educated, empowered and encouraged in every possible way for their challenging professional work.

## Bibliography:

- Bjerknes E. (2002). Experiential Learning, in: T. Inglar (ed.), *Learning and Counselling*, Vytautas Magnus University and Akershus University College.
- Blyth T. (1998). *The Teaching for Understanding guide*, Jossey-Bass, Wiley Imprint, USA.
- Bondy E., Kendall B. (1998). Ongoing Assessment, in: T. Blyth (ed.), *The Teaching for Understanding Guide*. Jossey-Bass, Wiley Imprint, USA.

- 
- Cambron-McCabe N. (2000). Opening Day, in: P. Senge (ed.), *Schools that Learn*, London, No-cholas Brealey Publishing.
- Grendstad N.M. (1990). *Å lære er å oppdage*, Oslo Didakta Norsk Forlag.
- Howe D. (2002). *On Being a Client*, London, Sage Publications.
- Jarvis P. (1995). *Adult and Continuing Education. Theory and practise*, ed. 2, London, Routledge.
- Kolb D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall.
- Lappen R. (2002). Awareness and Communication in Counselling, in: T. Inglar, (ed.), *Learning and Counselling*, Vytautus Magnus University and Akershus University College.
- Schön D. (1984). *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*, New York Basic Books.