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Reflective learning in social work education: scaffolding the process

MARIA DEMPSEY, CARMEL HALTON & MARIAN MURPHY

Abstract *This article examines the contribution of reflective learning in social work education to professional self-construction of social workers in Ireland. It suggests a framework for scaffolding this process on a post-graduate programme and gives an account of the issues and dilemmas faced by the authors in implementing this framework. The article focuses on the construction of a 'learning community', which facilitates and scaffolds reflective teaching/learning, in two particular course modules, the Use of Self in Social Work and the Practice Skills Laboratory. The authors document the underlying theoretical constructs utilised and the practical implications for the learning environment.*

Introduction

In Ireland, as in other countries, the contexts of social work practice are increasingly influenced by the globalisation of economies and communication networks and by the bureaucratisation of many employing agencies. Ireland is also moving into the kind of post-modern 'risk society' described by sociologists like Beck, where there is a generalised lack of confidence in professional expertise at a wide level (Beck, 1992). In Ireland, as in Britain, social work as a profession has experienced public scrutiny and sometimes vilification as a result of child abuse scandals, with a consequent heightening of the levels of anxiety experienced by social workers on a day-to-day basis. It could be said that social work is experiencing a crisis of identity about its role and function in a society which mandates it to carry out the role of protecting children from abuse and neglect, but which is at the same time extremely ambivalent towards those agents of protection. One of the challenges facing social work educators is to equip students with a strong sense of confidence and competence, as well as the flexibility to grow, change and learn as their roles and tasks are constantly re-defined. Most importantly, social workers entering the profession need a strong sense of agency so that they can themselves contribute to this redefinition of role and function. This is necessary if social work's professional activities are not to be totally defined by the exigencies of media and political pressures.

Social work students entering post-graduate training courses have been exposed to a range of theoretical disciplines within the social sciences, which equip them to think critically about the major social issues of our time. In the Irish context, this cohort of students tends to be younger than previous generations at the point of entry to professional training, thus bringing less practice and life experience to their professional training course. A major challenge for

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these students is the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical experience so that their practice is ethically grounded and skilled enough to respond to the complex demands which society places on them. Previous generations of social workers criticised professional training courses for failing to address this integration issue explicitly and adequately. In Britain, employers and politicians have entered the vacuum this shortfall created, with the consequent emphasis on competencies as the prevailing focus during training. In Ireland, also, the day-to-day work of social workers is increasingly influenced by managerial protocols. This leaves social workers in a vulnerable position regarding future professional self-definition. As social work educators, we consider that we need to re-examine our contribution to this developing scenario and to take more responsibility for our piece of the training requirement in education for professional practice.

Learning: a reflective model

We suggest that an effective mechanism for promoting effective professional self-construction is the development by social workers-in-training of the skills of reflective learning. This is a constructivist, phenomenological approach to learning, based on some of the ideas of Schon, Dewey and Kolb and, more recently, incorporating the thinking of Lyons, Nakkula and Seidel writing in teacher education in the US (Schon, 1983; Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984; Lyons, 1998; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; Seidel & Blythe, 1996). Dewey's definition of reflection is most widely quoted in relation to learning and is that used for the purpose of this article. He defined reflective thought as 'active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends' (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). Dewey believed that reflective learning involves: '(1) a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates, and (2) an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity' (p. 12). In the UK, Gould and Taylor have written about the potential for the application of reflective learning in social work (Gould & Taylor, 1996). This approach identifies the centrality of structured reflection as a process through which learning from experience takes place. Kolb's loop concept suggests that experience is acted upon through reflective observation, which in turn acts as the basis on which active experimentation followed by feedback produces change in practice behaviours (Kolb, 1984). This process encourages students to develop a strong sense of their own value base, and of how this relates to professional ethics and social work theories and methods. It thus contributes to developing the ability to make informed choices about what constitute appropriate professional behaviours. This is not an alternative theory of social work and it is important to emphasise this, because we consider reflective learning to be compatible with a range of social work theories and methods. It is our contention that this is an approach to learning that provides students with a valuable self-monitoring and professional self-constructive ability, which can be developed on a lifelong basis. This strengthens their potential as practitioners to engage positively and proactively with the pressures and constraints of everyday practice. Lifelong learning is becoming a key feature of modern life for all the professions, allowing for constant upgrading of knowledge and skills. The reflective learning process encourages students to develop a beginning framework of values, knowledge and skills, which can be added to, modified and expanded throughout the professional life cycle. What we have learned from our experience of teaching on a post-graduate course is that this learning process needs to be carefully scaffolded. Scaffolding involves the construction of a series of opportunities which systematically support learners to reflect on their previous experience, knowledge and skills, as well as on their current thinking and practice.

Scaffolding reflective learning

Steve Seidel suggests that a useful framework for approaching reflective learning is one which involves the learner in looking backward, looking inward, looking outward and looking forward (Seidel & Blythe, 1996). Using this framework, we have constructed a series of locations and tools within the post-graduate course structure which explicitly aim to develop students' reflective learning abilities. These include a skills laboratory, which is conducted with students in groups of 15, for four hours weekly in the first term of the first year, and for two hours weekly in the final term of second year. The class is further subdivided, during the four-hour session, into smaller groups of not more than five students for the purposes of role-play and video work. A second element of the process is a class focused specifically on the use of self in social work, which is facilitated by an external staff member, with the same groupings of 15 students, for two hours weekly in years 1 and 2. These two units are brought together through a portfolio-building process, which is also supported by 'portfolio teams', consisting of tutorial groups of five students, which meet fortnightly during the students' college-based terms. The portfolio-building process continues into the first and second placements, supported by tutors and practice teachers. Tutorial groups and practice teacher supervision on 'learning incidents', which are included in the portfolio, provide opportunities for crucial mentoring and 'critical friend' support. The student's learning is assessed via the portfolio, which includes an autobiographical section on learning from previous experience, entries on the learning experiences in the skills laboratory (supported by a video presentation), and reflections on aspects of theory which the student finds helpful. Part 2 of the portfolio is developed during the placement and it includes detailed learning incidents, the joint practice teacher/student placement report, reflections on learning themes that have emerged for the student and any other entries or artefacts that the student considers important in documenting his/her learning. The process of constructing the portfolio is supported by a requirement that students keep a learning journal, which forms the basis of ongoing conversations between student and tutor/practice teacher. In this article, we explore in detail some of the issues and dilemmas that arise in two of these locations, the skills laboratory and the class on use of self.

The skills laboratory: a forum for reflective learning

A key feature of the successful implementation of this framework for learning is the accessibility and acknowledgement of students' prior life and work experiences, which can be deconstructed and reflected on, in the new learning situations of classroom or practice placement. This is a central focus of the skills laboratory on the course where a programme is developed which values and makes explicit prior learning and experience and uses it as a resource for future learning. The skills laboratory aims to equip students not with 'a bag of tricks' but to develop an 'understanding of professional knowledge as primarily developed through practice and the systematic analysis of experience' (Gould & Taylor, 1996).

This is a challenging task. In common with Harris and other research, we have found that initially students tend to have technicist views of their training needs (Harris, 1996). The early phase of the learning cycle often produces a sense of being de-skilled in relation to past practice experiences. The reflective learning process requires students to re-explore such experiences, and attend to the feelings connected with them. These may sometimes be feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, and disillusionment. Thus such exploration can cause considerable anxiety and difficulty for those used to a school and undergraduate learning

environment where the more traditional 'banking' approach to learning operated. However as Claxton suggests:

Unless we understand equally the dynamics of *engagement*, which enables learners to commit themselves and their learning resources wholeheartedly to the process of learning, and of *disinhibition*, which enables learners to avoid or overcome tendencies to defend or withdraw unnecessarily, then our attempts at facilitation are always likely to founder (Claxton *et al.*, 1996, p. 7).

The extent to which this process facilitates students to develop a more complex but coherent model of practice is, as Harris found, highly dependent on the cues and opportunities for rigorous reflection provided by a mentor. In our case, this is either the classroom facilitator or the placement practice teacher. Our experience also suggests that the climate for learning is critical and is dependent on the atmosphere of safety that is created by the mentor for the disclosure of practice behaviours. The high levels of anxiety aroused by the self-exposure involved in role-play and video-taping of students' work must be acknowledged and addressed if the risk taking which is necessary for learning in the experiential forum is to be promoted and full participation in all role-play, simulated games and video by learners is to be achieved. In recognising the importance of the learning milieu, Rogers' work on creating a learning environment which is learner-centred, with an emphasis on establishing a climate of openness and trust, has been found to be very helpful (Rogers, 1983). Schon's suggestion that the teacher can effect a positive influence on individuals and the group by encouraging dialogue with and between learners on their implicit learning theories and styles has also proved useful (Schon, 1983). Ethnographic research claims that the individual's life history affects how and what is learned. By searching actively within the learning environment for a convergence of meaning through reciprocal reflection-in-action, Schon suggests that blocks to learning can be overcome and then a real 'practicum' or group learning environment created.

A practicum is a setting designed for the task of learning practice. In a context which approximates a practice world, students learn by doing, although their doing usually falls short of real world work ... it is a virtual world relatively free of the pressures, distractions, and risks of the real one, to which, nevertheless, it refers. It stands in an intermediary space between the practice world, the 'lay' world of ordinary life, and the esoteric world of the academy (Schon, 1983, p. 37).

Constructing the learning environment

The primary aim of the skills laboratory curriculum has to be the enhancement and improvement of practice by students. Using a reflective learning model in this context challenges, through both structure and presentation, the technical-rational model of education, which has constituted a dominant paradigm in professional education. Because we view social work practice as an activity which involves the practitioner in the process of making sense of the world of practice, social work education has to explicitly acknowledge and give due consideration to this sense-making process. This is achieved through focusing on the practice experience of participants, however limited this may be initially. Usher suggests that theory in the practice sense, which is not organised and codified, is clearly bound up in action and finds expression in practical discourse (Usher, 1989). The recognition that action is always underpinned by theory allows for the conscious identification and deconstruction of that informal theory. The skills laboratory focuses on the learners' need to

act appropriately and effectively in particular situations of practice. Usher suggests that normally practitioners do this

By using a certain kind of knowledge and reasoning which is neither theoretical nor technical. It may involve know-how but must be mediated in the light of the circumstances of the situation and is therefore situational and ethical (Usher, 1989, p. 79).

From this perspective, the learner is not viewed as a technician but as a person who brings to the classroom and to practice, existing resources of knowledge, wisdom and judgement, as well as biases and prejudices. The challenge in the skills laboratory is to achieve a learning environment which makes it possible for participants to uncover and reflect on the appropriateness of their underlying constructions. Scaffolding the learning process in the classroom involves the facilitator in providing the learner with opportunities for role-play, writing and honest dialogue. For this process to be successful there has to be a real sense that the classroom is jointly owned by the learners and the facilitator. An important prerequisite for constructing this type of learning environment is the negotiation of learning needs and requirements for the learning environment. In this context, the facilitator is a supporter and collaborator with the learners in the learning process. A community of learners thus emerges where goals become shared, and reflection on learning challenges everyone progressively. The process of understanding and making sense of oneself in particular situations of social work practice is the constant challenge. It involves both interpretation and application within particular contexts of practice, which are increasingly complex. However, as Usher suggests:

This application is not that of the technical-rationality model but rather an appropriation to oneself—one can only make 'sense' in terms of one's perspective, framework or paradigm (Usher, 1989, p. 79).

This is not only an internal, individual project for the student because, as Usher also points out, all learners are influenced by culture and history, by a 'tradition' which is a combination of societal, professional, institutional and informal influences. The skills laboratory provides a forum for the interrogation of the effects of these influences on our actions and thus on our social work practices. In the context of this interactive approach to teaching and learning, knowledge must be reformulated in the light of new perceptions and is therefore constantly changing. Paradigmatic shifts thereby go hand in hand with behavioural changes. Receiving feedback from both peers and mentor means that increasing clarity about the outcomes of our behaviour becomes possible. In this respect, the practice skills laboratory is located at the coalface of personal development in the educative process. The capacity to manage the uncertainty arising from the constantly changing complexity of social work practice requires an ability to make conscious choices about action. Reflective learning in the skills laboratory develops this capacity by bringing together the practical situations of practice with relevant theories and facilitating students to identify the personal lens which they bring to both. This approach recognises that social work is a practical activity, which generates knowledge and theoretical understanding of its own practice. The objective is that the circle of action-reflection-enquiry that is developed in the classroom will continue into the practice context and will encourage students to be conscious, proactive and responsive practitioners.

This approach to teaching/learning places demands on the teacher/facilitator to move from a position of being an 'expert' knowledge provider, to being a facilitator of the co-construction of meaning and knowledge with students. This requires an openness to self-disclosure, a willingness to engage in critical exploration of the facilitator's own prejudices, values and behaviours, and continued development of genuineness, congruence, active

listening and empathy on the part of the facilitator. We have found that being part of a developmental, multi-professional reflective learning network, both within and without our own university, has provided us with essential support in developing our work with students. An important part of this process has been the construction of our own teaching portfolios.

A forum for self-reflection

What has become increasingly clear to us over the nine years since the course's inception has been that a major barrier that can arise during this reflective learning process is a lack of preparation on the part of students for the self-scrutiny that is required. We have increasingly addressed this issue before the point of entry, through the course selection process, which requires applicants to engage in experiential group exercises. However, it also became apparent to us that the course needed to include a module, which specifically allowed students the space to process issues that arose in relation to the self. The argument for inclusion of such a module is reinforced by our position in relation to a core philosophical and practice perspective on social work education. In terms of a value base, this perspective can be represented as person-centred, inclusive and focused on empowerment. In line with social work's own ethical code, this perspective places the process of interaction between student/worker and others, whether clients or colleagues, at the centre of any consideration of role, tasks and skills. It rejects an approach which is mechanistic, purely task-focused or totally reliant on the exigencies of situation or contextual pressures. Whilst the importance and influence of such pressures is acknowledged and discussed, the view of the social work activity, whether at individual, family, group, community or social action levels, is of an opportunity for the coming together of two or more human beings in a person-to-person encounter. This encounter, at the very least, should not diminish any of the persons involved and, at best, offers opportunities for personal growth, development, problem solving and social change. It does not deny the existence or necessity for conflict and challenge in such encounters but does require that interpersonally respectful behaviour is maintained and promoted.

We consider that the most challenging feature of the person-to-person encounter is the demand that it puts on the student/worker to be genuinely and congruently present. This requires a minimal level of self-awareness and self-knowledge which cannot be assumed simply because a student has obtained a place on the course. It is important, we suggest, that social-workers-in-training, therefore, have an explicit opportunity to:

- (1) develop awareness of their own unique qualities and strengths, which they bring to helping relationships;
- (2) explore what it is in each individual, which leads them to want to help or care for others;
- (3) explore what are the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for such work;
- (4) distinguish between responsibilities *to* and responsibility *for* helpees;
- (5) develop openness, honesty and genuineness in communication as opposed to the development of a false or 'professional' persona which can happen only too easily when people are thrown in without warning or support to emotionally-laden situations;
- (6) recognise that self-care and self-support are important factors in bringing depth and quality into work with people;
- (7) recognise that the ability to listen to, accept and engage empathetically with others is dependent on the ability to listen to and accept the self. We consider the self-empowerment of the student/worker to be an important component of the ability to work

in empowering ways with clients and others. We attempt to develop this process through a specific module, which addresses the use of self in social work practice.

Use of self: scaffolding the process of self-reflection

The underlying aim of the 'Use of Self' module is to allow space for students to become aware of themselves and to explore in a safe environment who they are and how it feels to help themselves and to reflect on this in the light of their practice. For some, the module provides time to contextualise the theory they hear on a daily basis in a personally meaningful way. Through the module, which is located in both first and second year, students start the process of defining themselves in terms of the self rather than in terms of what they do for the other. Establishment of ground rules is an important part of the process. Issues relating to confidentiality, punctuality, commitment, feedback, and involvement of oneself in the group are explored. Such negotiations clearly link to professionalism in the work setting, and prepare students for these issues when they arise in the practice placements.

Reflective learning is inextricably linked to exploration of one's 'self' at both cognitive and affective levels. Indeed, experience has suggested that reflective exploration for students who have taken this course, has been more acceptable or perhaps more comfortable at a cognitive level in year one. During this time issues which may never have before been acknowledged or named are brought to conscious awareness. By year two, the process of reflecting is much more a balance between logical, objective cognition and the more subjective affect. While the group is experienced as threatening for some and liberating for others, all members start to become more aware of the beliefs they hold about themselves and others and of the feelings they associate with those beliefs. The process forward involves developing an understanding of how they came to hold their beliefs. Clearly linked to this is the ability to acknowledge the ways in which one's beliefs, assumptions and prejudices can influence thoughts, feelings and thus helping behaviours. Incorporating role-play based on real-life scenarios helps students to identify situations in which they are reactive as opposed to proactive. Such role-play, with feedback from others, helps students to nurture a growing awareness of their own needs, wants and fears. Deeper self-awareness can in turn lead to a clearer understanding of how students can support themselves emotionally and of how they can develop new avenues of such support. This knowledge is an important requirement in the many challenging situations of modern-day social work practice.

The level of depth in the group is dependent on the level of trust between group members. Risk taking is an integral part of trust building. If we do not risk by sharing, how do we know if we can trust others to contain what we have shared? The level at which the individual risks is highly subjective and can be approached using Seidel's framework of:

- (1) looking back at past experiences, which influence my current thoughts, beliefs and behaviours;
- (2) looking inward to oneself—does it feel right for me to share my thoughts and feelings at this time?;
- (3) looking outward to the group—will the group 'hold' what I share of myself?
- (4) looking forward—ultimately moving on in this decision.

Seidel has developed this framework within the context of a teacher education process aimed at reflective practice in classrooms. Seidel suggests that many teachers engage in a process of 'looking backward' as a regular part of a self-monitoring activity. Some discuss this stock-taking with colleagues or friends, others just make mental notes. Bringing this backward-looking review to conscious awareness helps student teachers to review their work and to

develop and grow as learners. The inward-looking process helps the learner to be more aware of the impact of the course material and discussions on him/herself. In the practice situation, this process helps the learner to consider why some work feels more important to him/her than other work—what has been motivating and satisfying and why. In looking outward, Seidel suggests, the learner is able to get a sense of the meanings that are held by others, some of whom may have very different views on similar situations. This helps the learner to broaden his/her perspectives and to take others into account in both the learning and practice situations. This four-step process culminates in looking forward. In this phase, he points out, 'we move from stock-taking to goal-setting and planning. Often, these goals and plans will still be somewhat vague but, making them as specific as we can at that moment, we set ourselves in a direction that has at least some of the following features: ideas about content, process, standards, and timetable of future learning' (Seidel & Blythe, 1996, p. 3). Within the 'Use of Self' class, if the individual has engaged in the process outlined above, then he/she has moved forward in a fundamental way. Having reflected on what risk means in the context of self and integrating that concept with the environment of the group, whether or not the risk of sharing is embarked upon, learning, in the form of each student's knowledge of him/herself, has moved forward. An important concomitant of this is that students develop an awareness of what is often asked of social work clients in terms of self-disclosure.

Sharing thoughts and feelings with others through structured opportunities for conversation is an essential element in scaffolding a reflective learning process that fosters professional self-construction. Through verbalising the internal conversation, reflective learning becomes more concrete. The student becomes, as Lyons puts it 'the author of one's own learning' (Lyons, 1998). Experience of the 'Use of Self' module over the past two years has shown that the dialogue that is entered with other group members aids the process of integration between cognition, feeling and behaviour. The process also provides support for the learner to move beyond the intellectual grasp of ideas to find individual meaning within the extensive range of theoretical models and practice contexts, which are integral to social work education and practice.

In terms of format, the group is essentially self-directed. While the group facilitator plans each session based on what the group has requested, pursuing the aims of the group means being flexible enough to change the plan to respond to students' expressed needs. This is important in modelling flexibility and also in encouraging students to find the support they need in their personal and professional lives. It also provides an opportunity for individuals to challenge themselves to change aspects of the self that inhibit their overall development. However, any such changes are identified by the students themselves and supported by the facilitator in doing so. The essence of the approach is respect and positive encouragement. In the second year this module provides a forum for reflection on the effect on the self of experiences arising during the two placements, particularly those that had resonances in their own lives such as trauma and loss.

One of the main features of this module is that it can help students to explore what is part of the self and what is not. This in turn can aid in developing ways of coping with the traumas of others, without becoming 'hardened' or overly distanced. At the same time understanding oneself more clearly can counteract the tendency to over-identify emotionally with others, which has been linked, in a variety of studies, to burnout in social work as a result of emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Thus we see this module as a crucial component of the overall reflective learning process. We have found that it links very compatibly with the practice skills laboratory, with the social work theory and method classes and with the overall thrust of the course towards the integration of students' own values, intellect, emotions and behaviours. We are convinced

that this enhances and supports students' initial idealism and concern for social justice and facilitates students in developing a framework for their practice which is truly self-directed.

Scaffolding reflecting learning for anti-oppressive practice

The two units described above provide a safe location, in conjunction with an individual portfolio-building process, and a structured tutorial system, for students to develop their ability to learn reflectively. In particular, they contribute significantly to the looking backward and inward sections of the Seidel framework. Looking back at where they have come from, including familial, educational, social and work experiences, and focusing on what they have brought from those biographical experiences facilitates students to consciously identify current and future learning needs. However, the framework, if it is not to be narrowly and exclusively self-focused, needs to include a strong element of looking outward. This has traditionally been the function of research and knowledge-based modules on social work training courses, as well as practice placements, where students are alerted to the real-life situations of a variety of client groups. Anti-oppressive practice theory has taken social work education a long way in 'looking outward' in ways that seek to empower the users of social work services. We are not convinced, however, that it has yet been effectively transferred into the everyday behaviours of social workers emerging from modern day training courses. We believe that reflective learning has the potential to contribute to this process. The theory and tools of reflective learning facilitate the construction of a learning environment that is paradigmatically transformative for participants. Paradigmatic transformation is a prerequisite for behavioural change in practice, although not sufficient in itself. There is, however, an inherent compatibility between reflective learning methods and critical and anti-oppressive practice theories, the combination of which has the potential to be truly transformative of action, as well as cognition. The opportunity to practise behaviours and to receive feedback on these actions is a crucial feature of Kolb's loop cycle. We believe that neither college nor agency-based learning sites currently deconstruct sufficiently nor provide clearly constructed frameworks for students to practise and receive feedback on proactive skills for working in anti-oppressive ways. Bridging this discontinuity that has traditionally existed between theoretical understanding and skills in social action is an important avenue for the future application of reflective learning principles on our course and in social work education generally.

Conclusion

Reflective learning theory has provided us with a useful framework for thinking through the objectives and processes involved in social work education at a time when social change in Ireland is having a major impact on the contexts in which social workers practise. We have put considerable energy into creating a teaching/learning environment which encourages students to actively engage in a process of professional self-definition. Qualitative outcome evaluation of the effectiveness of reflective learning in practice is a crucial next step. This will complete a hermeneutic circle of enquiry that will span teaching/learning, professional practice/supervision and professional research/evaluation. We are currently engaged in the beginning stages of this important project and, to date, student evaluations of the experience of reflective learning on the course have been very positive. These evaluations suggest that many students, initially at least, find the emphasis on reflective learning on the course very challenging. In the majority of cases, however, they experience it as an effective and satisfying way of bringing together their college and agency-based learning. They can also identify the

patterns of their own learning and development over time, which for most students is experienced as empowering. Two students from the 2000 class summed up their experiences in the following ways:

Reflective learning has been an essential tool in the processing of my learning during the year, but particularly while on placement. I found that I could take more from my experiences and identify some positive and negative aspects of the way that I work. Thus, these were either reinforced or I began a process of changing. It has been invaluable.

and

Reflective learning has been new to me. It was uncomfortable at times, looking back at how you did things, why you did them and what you take away from it. It has also been challenging to engage in it, partly because it is new, but also because it creates space to question things—like your values, beliefs and attitudes. It above all has been a refreshing approach and very helpful tool in my learning throughout the year. It opens opportunity for assessment of our practice both positively and critically (which is also positive).

The teaching/learning practices outlined here have been developed and re-constructed through a continuous process of consultation and evaluation between the staff course team and successive student groups. For the past two years, this process has also involved a series of workshops with practice teachers, with whom we are anxious to develop an increasingly collaborative and mutually beneficial approach to teaching/learning and ongoing professional development in general. In the forthcoming academic year, we plan to take this process forward through the development of joint practice teacher/tutor portfolio development groups. In Ireland, as in Britain and other countries, social workers are indicating a need for, and interest in, ongoing professional education and development. We believe that reflective learning in general, and portfolio development in particular, offer opportunities for taking this project forward in a way that values practitioners' experience and that ensures that new learning will be relevant and useful for everyday practice. It is our intention that this will contribute not only to pedagogical knowledge, but also to the ongoing development and maintenance of standards of excellent practice within the profession. This we believe to be our best hope for continued professional self-construction within social work at a time when this process is under continuous threat from powerful influences which have more to do with political and economic exigencies than with the interests of the consumers of social work services.

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