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Introduction

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Preparation for Contact: An Aid to Effective Social Work Intervention

Harry Douglas

This article proposes that a pre-contact phase of work which helps prepare the worker/ social work student for face-to-face intervention is a prerequisite for effective practice. It builds on the original work by Douglas and McColgan in which preparation for contact was placed in the context of the Diploma in Social Work Competence requirements. In this revised article links are made to the new degree in social work while retaining the framework which provides for examination of essential knowledge, skills and values which underpin effective preparation for a social work encounter. The article discusses the Preparation for Contact exercise and explores its value as a learning tool for social work students, its usefulness as an assessment tool for university tutors and agency practice teachers in relation to testing the student's 'readiness' for contact and its place in providing practice learning evidence in relation to requirements of the degree in social work.

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Introduction

It is generally regarded that thorough preparation for any task makes a positive outcome more likely. The social work task is no different. Two eminent social work authors have written coherently about worker preparation for 'client' (service user) contact. Shulman (1979) wrote about what he termed the 'Preliminary Phase of Work', while Kadushin (1972) regarded preparation as an integral part of the interview process. Both authors have therefore emphasised the importance of effective preparation in determining that a worker is ready for contact. This article

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contends that a pre-contact phase of work which helps prepare the worker for the actual face-to-face intervention is a prerequisite for effective practice.

Interestingly the concept of 'readiness to practise' which has been developed by a number of authors who advocate that specific testing of social work students' preparedness to effectively engage in the social work task in the university is essential prior to practice learning in the field, reinforces that thorough preparation is a prerequisite for practice. Leveridge (2003) has written about a module developed in the context of English social work education while Plath (2003) discussed an Australian perspective. In Northern Ireland the local Social Care Council in its requirements for the new degree in social work (NISCC, 2003a) has identified the necessity of students passing a specific Preparation for Practice module before they are permitted to move into their first practice learning experience in a social work agency.

It is against this background that the author puts forward the view that a specific exercise—Preparation for Contact—can play a significant role in the social work student's practice learning experience both prior to and during practice learning in the field. This article will introduce and then discuss this concept in terms of:

- its intrinsic value as a learning tool for social work students;
- its usefulness as an assessment tool for university tutors and agency practice teachers in relation to testing the student's 'readiness' for contact; and
- its place in providing practice learning evidence in relation to requirements of the degree in social work.

This article makes reference to, and draws learning from, feedback received from students and practice teachers who have used the exercise as set out in the 1999 article (Douglas & McColgan, 1999).

The Concept of a Framework

The concept of producing a framework as a method of providing a structured approach, a standard format and a means of ensuring comprehensiveness or completeness has contemporary validity in social work practice. This is evidenced in, for instance, procedures and guidelines developed in the child protection and adult protection arenas. In the latter field authors such as Pritchard (2000) and Douglas (2004) have indicated that the existence of such guidelines can provide clarity, focus and direction in situations of potential anxiety and complexity.

The idea of developing a tool which would focus a student's thinking in a pre-contact phase originally arose out of the author's reflection on the concept of 'tuning in' as articulated by Shulman (1979) but expanded to encompass the three-fold requirements of knowledge, skills and values expected of social work students. For students learning in often unfamiliar territory and with varying degrees of apprehension, the notion of providing a means of 'anchoring' their practice in a sound and considered theoretical and experiential base is attractive. The framework presented below outlines the author's attempt to articulate this learning anchor. The

framework is a tool for comprehensive exploration and tuning-in prior to contact. Consider the following:

a. Legislation

- What provides a mandate for intervention?
- What about statutory roles, responsibilities and requirements?

b. Policy and Procedures

- What agency policies and procedures are relevant?
- How do they impact on, or direct this intervention?

c. Theoretical considerations

- Relating to this situation.
- Relating to method(s) of intervention.

d. Previous knowledge

- Held by agency/others.
- Student's experience of similar situations should be drawn on.

e. Tuning-in

- To own feelings relating to this situation (self-awareness).
- To client's possible feelings, re. the agency, the student, the situation (preliminary empathy).
- To a strategy for intervention in the situation (purpose, beginnings, contracting).

f. Skills

- What skills may be most relevant?
- Degrees of competence and confidence in using these?

g. Values

- What are values and ethical issues around in this situation?
- What are the implications for practice?
- Consider anti-oppressive practice issues.

It identifies a series of questions which enable the student to explore and reflect on:

- (1) the knowledge required to inform practice;
- (2) potentially appropriate social work methods and skills;
- (3) relevant previous experiences; and
- (4) values/ethical considerations.

In the context of student learning the framework is designed to provide direction and focus. Rather than being slavishly followed and having the feel of an academic or procedural straight jacket it is intended to be used flexibly and creatively. It can therefore be tailored to the learning needs of a particular student group or an

individual student. For some, especially those in their first agency placement or in a new area of work, it may be beneficial to follow the framework step-by-step. For others it might be that specific section(s) could be used in isolation to focus on particular aspects of learning, e.g. legislation, the impact of previous experiences or value dilemmas.

It is the author's contention based on personal experience of using the framework with many students and feedback received from numerous practice teaching colleagues, that vigorously attending to this exercise prior to contact with service users, especially the initial contact, should aid the student's intervention. The framework is adaptable and versatile. As stated above it can be used as a whole or in part. It can also be used in a variety of settings, including simulation in the classroom, as well as in the range of agencies in which social work is undertaken. It is therefore neither prescriptive or absolute. Indeed it may be usefully constructed very early in the student's practice learning experience as a joint venture between student and practice teacher. This would serve two purposes—identify the needs, expectations and requirements of both parties, and provide an early opportunity for collaborative working. In the Northern Ireland social work educational context, as noted above, students may well have become familiar with the tool in the university college prior to coming to the practice learning agency. The tool is one of several tuning-in frameworks taught in the Preparation for Practice module which, as stated previously, all students must pass before they are allowed to begin practice learning in a social work agency.

The Framework's Value as a Learning Tool

Thompson *et al.* (1994) and Morrison (1993) both promoted the use of adult learning theory as a structure within which the students' learning can be understood and maximised. Both consider Kolb's Learning Cycle which identifies four possible stages in the process of learning: Concrete Experience; Reflective Observation; Abstract Conceptualisation; and Active Experimentation. Coulshed (1993) explained the cycle succinctly as follows:

Immediate concrete experience becomes the basis of observation and reflection; these constitute "hypotheses" from which new actions can be deduced; these then serve as a guide for action, creating once again fresh experiences on which to reflect.

The framework for Preparation for Contact fits within this construct. Studying the particular social work scenario constitutes the initial experience and the structure of the exercise guides the student through the remaining stages:

- Reflective Observation
 - Identifying legislation, policies and procedures.
 - Linking to previous experiences.
 - Tuning in to feelings of self and service user(s).
- Abstract Conceptualisation

- Linking theory to practice.
- Considering relevant knowledge, skills and values.
- Identifying challenges and dilemmas.

- Active Experimentation

- Deciding on a strategy for contact.
- Rehearsing same.

The supervision process in the practice learning placement can ensure that the learning at each stage is maximised before the student progresses to the next stage—direct contact with the service user. In the classroom simulation situation, group or individual discussion can be used to examine the learning achieved.

It is contended that a further attraction for using this exercise is that it is grounded in real-life practice situations. While in the classroom case study material can simulate the reality of social work, when the exercise is used on the practice learning placement, work allocated to the student provides the case material. In either circumstance, the use of the exercise meets the ‘validity test’ which Doel *et al.* (1996) have established for the value of activities used to promote student learning. The exercise ‘passes’ Doel *et al.*’s four point test in that it:

- is relevant to the student’s learning needs;
- promotes an opportunity for learning on a number of fronts;
- provides a vehicle for validated learning, i.e. the student can get it right; and
- learning gained can be transferred to practice.

In the author’s experience and in reports provided by other practice teachers, students who undertake the exercise understand its rationale and benefit from this structured learning tool. The learning achieved is validated through the supervision process and can provide the foundation for competent and confident practice.

Doel *et al.* (1996) also referred to the value of simulation in accelerating the student’s learning in preparing for active (direct) work with service users. They identified a number of benefits from this type of tool which the author of this article has seen evidence of. Thus the exercise does provide a ‘safety net’ for the student’s learning and it can ensure thorough preparation and safeguards the quality of service that users will consequently receive when contact is initiated.

In summary then the Preparation for Contact exercise can assist in testing the students’ learning style, it provides an opportunity to get close to real-life situations and it enables the student to produce high quality preparation prior to direct intervention with service users.

The Framework’s Value as an Assessment Tool

As referred to above, one of the most welcome innovations of the degree in social work introduced in Northern Ireland in 2004 is the production of a module entitled Preparation for Practice (NISCC, 2003). Programme providers (collaborative

partnerships between the academic institutions and social services agencies) have decided that social work students *must* pass this module before they proceed to practice learning in an agency. Douglas & McColgan (1999) stated that one of the concerns of the practice teacher, especially in the early stages of practice learning, is in judging a student's readiness for direct practice. This takes on added significance when the social work setting is such that a student works in isolation. This is of course usually the case in what are described as 'fieldwork' placements. The availability of the Preparation for Contact exercise which, as stated previously, can be used in the classroom as well as on the practice learning placement, arguably provides an assessor with clearer information about the student's learning at a number of levels.

Completing the exercise will provide assessable information in relation to the student's:

- (1) competent use of English (seems basic, but this can highlight at an early stage problematic issues);
- (2) ability to locate and understand relevant legislation, policies and procedures;
- (3) accuracy, breadth and depth of the knowledge base and the capacity to make links between theory and practice;
- (4) capacity to identify and draw on previous knowledge and experience and the ability to transfer learning from other situations;
- (5) ability to explore emotional and psychological aspects of people's experience, including their own;
- (6) capacity to plan a contact with a service user which is purposive, sensitive and competent;
- (7) understanding of social work values, the potential for oppression and constructive ways of dealing with issues; and
- (8) level of competence in core skills/attributes such as time management, information gathering, networking and perhaps even a capacity to take on board constructive criticism.

In the author's view using the framework as a means of assessing readiness for contact across the range of areas indicated above is legitimate but this must be explicitly discussed with the student in the beginning stages of the working relationship.

Links between the Exercise and the Learning Requirements of the Degree in Social Work

Owens (1995), when considering the changes the Diploma in Social Work brought to the role of practice teacher with regard to assessment, contended that the responsibility for assessment was no longer the exclusive prerogative of the practice teacher as the Dip.S.W. competences placed an onus on students in the collection and evaluation of their own evidence. This was particularly due to the requirements of the area entitled 'Developing Professional Competence' with its emphasis on analysis and reflection. Social work education and training has continued to progress since then,

especially with the requirement placed on registered social workers to continually pursue their own professional development (NISCC, 2003a). Introducing beginning social work students to the Preparation for Contact exercise starts them off on the journey of taking responsibility for their own learning and self-reflection.

Douglas & McColgan (1999) suggested links between the Preparation for Contact exercise and practice requirements across the six Units of Competence of the Diploma in Social Work. Similarly it is contended that the exercise can be directly referenced to requirements in the degree in social work across a number of the Key Roles in social work and the relevant skills and underpinning knowledge areas. It should be noted that in the context of this article the references to degree in social work requirements are taken from the Northern Ireland Framework Specifications for the Degree in Social Work (DHSSPS, 2003). Users of the Preparation for Contact exercise outside of Northern Ireland should refer to the appropriate set of requirements when using it for evidential purposes. It is anticipated that similar links to those outlined below can be made as the learning specifications for students in Northern Ireland are based on the six Key Roles in the National Occupational Standards for Social Work which underpin the social work profession across the United Kingdom (NISCC, 2003b).

Link 1

In *Key Role 1*, the first Practice Focus is entitled 'Prepare for social work contact and involvement' (A1). The specification framework sets out in detail the types of skills, underpinning knowledge and outcomes (practice evidence) which this activity entails. They include a number of areas which the Preparation for Contact exercise specifically asks the student to address, for instance:

- Identify and access the range and source(s) of information required to prepare for initial contact (B1).
- Legislation and social policy (C4).
- Organisation structures, policies and procedures for referral (C5).
- Review agency notes and other literature relevant to the case or situation (D1).
- Evaluate all information to identify the best form of initial involvement (D3).

Link 2

In *Key Role 5*, the first Practice Focus is entitled 'Manage and be accountable for own work' (A14). As in Link 1 (above) the specification framework sets out in detail the types of skills, underpinning knowledge and outcomes (practice evidence) which this activity entails. Several of these areas could be addressed through the completion of the Preparation for Contact exercise. These are:

- Reflect on and modify own professional behaviour in the light of growing experience (B58).

- Identify and keep under review personal and professional boundaries (B59).
- Awareness of own values, prejudices, ethical dilemmas and conflicts of interest and their implications on own practice (C56).

Link 3

In *Key Role 6*, the first Practice Focus aims to ensure that social workers can and social work students learn to 'Research, analyse, evaluate and use up-to-date knowledge of best social work practice'. The Preparation for Contact exercise could be used to enable students to demonstrate these aspects of professional development in the following ways:

- By critically evaluating contrasting theories, explanations, research, policies, procedures and methods of intervention (B77).
- By evaluating the learning from: own practice, including case notes; current and emerging research and expertise and experience of others (B79).
- Through implementing a range of social work models, methods and programmes which are knowledge and/or evidence based to develop and improve own practice (D73).

It is therefore suggested that asking a student to use the Preparation for Contact framework could provide them with written material which provides evidence of their ability to gather and reflect on pertinent information prior to direct interaction with service users. Links 1–3 outlined above identify how the exercise has relevance to Key Roles 1, 5 and 6. In the university classroom setting or early stages of practice learning in the agency, Links 1 and 3 might be most pertinent. As the student's practice learning experience increases and they are given more responsibility, Link 2 might assume a greater role in gauging ongoing development. It is, however, important to reiterate that experience would indicate that the link to Key Role 1—especially the emphasis on preparation for work—is the aspect of the exercise which has proved to be most useful in the context of the Diploma in Social Work.

Penultimate Thought

The potential dangers arising from such preparation need to be recognised. An over rigid application could lead to students thinking that they know all the answers—contact may therefore be characterised by:

- fixed ideas and assumptions;
- preconceived agendas;
- inflexibility when faced with the reality of people's life stories; and
- stifling of a working relationship based on partnership between the social work student and service user in the exploration of needs and potential ways forward.

The potential for such dangers can be addressed through growing self-awareness on the student's part and through effective supervision by the practice teacher.

It is the author's belief that the potential drawbacks of the exercise are clearly outweighed by its advantages. Its value as a learning tool, a mechanism for assessment and as a means of providing evidence of development and practice is well worth testing.

Conclusion

The author's experience of using the Preparation for Contact exercise with students since 1999, and anecdotal feedback from other students and practice teachers, has demonstrated that it can be an effective learning tool. Adherence to this structured method of preparation:

- (1) brings legislation, policies and procedures 'to life' by encouraging the student to directly relate them to a specific piece of work rather than considering them in the abstract;
- (2) ensures that the student gives sufficient thought to relating theory to practice. This specific reference to a knowledge and theory base can prove to be particularly beneficial to the student who struggles in the area of conceptualisation;
- (3) encourages students to recognise their own feelings regarding contact and the impact of these on work. The student's feelings are validated by the fact that they are included in the exercise and consequently can be explored further in supervision;
- (4) emphasises the three-fold integration of knowledge, skills and values in the production of social work competence; and
- (5) promotes the notion of the adequate preparation for each piece of work undertaken by a social worker. In this way the habit of effective preparation developed by a student would become integrated into the newly qualified practitioner's way of working.

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