Introductory Module

Unit 3: Learning as a Way of Being: Reflective Practice, Experiential Learning and Supervision in Adult Guidance and Counselling

Table of Contents:

Unit 3: Learning as a Way of Being: Reflective Practice, Experiential Learning and Supervision in Adult Guidance and Counselling

Introduction

The development of the reflective practitioner lies at the heart of the approach and philosophy of this course. This approach does not seek to replace the traditional structures of knowledge where the power and status resides in the ideas and theories but attempts to develop and deepen the learning through the lived experience of the learner so that it has relevance and meaning for the learner. Knowledge does not reside in a book; it resides in the person and is transformed as the person engages in a continual process of action, reflection, theory and pragmatism.

The ethos of the course is based on the belief that it is our task to create a learning environment that encourages this reflective process. In this way learners will be equipped with the skills and knowledge to cope with change and the challenges of working with the marginalised and long-term unemployed. Vaill (1996) wonders what kind of learning is important for people to live decently and purposefully under conditions of constant change. In this view learning is regarded as a way of being that extends to the whole person, which impacts on all levels of awareness. It emphasises the changing of organisations and systems to make them more democratic, fair and caring.

This course is unusual in the university context in that it places a high emphasis on the assessment of both skills and personal development, in addition to the more traditional academic skills and knowledge. A learner remarked that:

It is not possible to isolate the highlights of the course, it is as an entire experience that it can only be judged; suffice to say it was an exemplary self-audit.

(Department of Adult and Community Education: 2003).

There are, however, a number of core beliefs and philosophies that underpin the course process and content, and these will be articulated in this unit.

Centrality of Experience and Reflection

According to Kovan and Dirkx (2003) work *"brings the person in deep and intimate relationship with the outer world"* and work is therefore a *"location for a form of deep learning and the realisation of inner meaning and change"* (p.101). This learning emerges from *"an active engagement with everyday experience"* (p.107) and for this reason learners on this course are invited to start with their experience of working with clients in employment services. In a small group learners reflect on their work, the areas that they find difficult and the areas they want to develop. Over the course each learner submits four taped 15 minute sessions of their client work. He/she critiques the session; names the skills he/she uses, refers to the appropriate theoretical models and identifies areas for further development. The course offers clear statements of skills and competencies, which must be reached. The skills must be relevant to the learners' needs. This is a revealing and potentially exposing experience and can only take place when trust has been established. When a supportive learning environment has been created it is then possible to encourage the development of the self-reflective practitioner. It is not possible to learn from experience without reflection, but there needs to be a structure that encourages reflection.

The idea of reflective practice depends on the belief that we are capable of learning from experience and is increasingly viewed as of particular relevance to professions that demand a high degree of

self-understanding and knowledge [where] the issue of personal and professional development and … the personal qualities, values and beliefs of … professionals are of central importance (Scaife and Walsh, 2001 p.30).

Therefore reflective practice has become the dominant mode of learning for professions that demand a high level of personal development, intuition, relationship building and so on.

Moon (1999) explores the process of experiential learning and the role of reflection in promoting and consolidating such learning. She writes that:

I*n general terms, the distinguishing features of experiential learning are that it refers to the organising and construction of learning from observations that have been made in some practical situation, with the implication that the learning can then lead to action (or improved action)* (p.20).

Moon reviews a number of theorists in the field of experiential learning and concludes that there is general agreement among them that there are a number of phases in the experiential learning cycle. They are:

- Development of a need to resolve something
- Clarification of the issues
- Review and recollection
- Review of the emotional state
- Processing of knowledge and ideas

- Eventual resolution and possible action and transformation

Kolb has proposed that learning on the basis of experience and reflection follows a distinct pattern, represented in the following diagram:
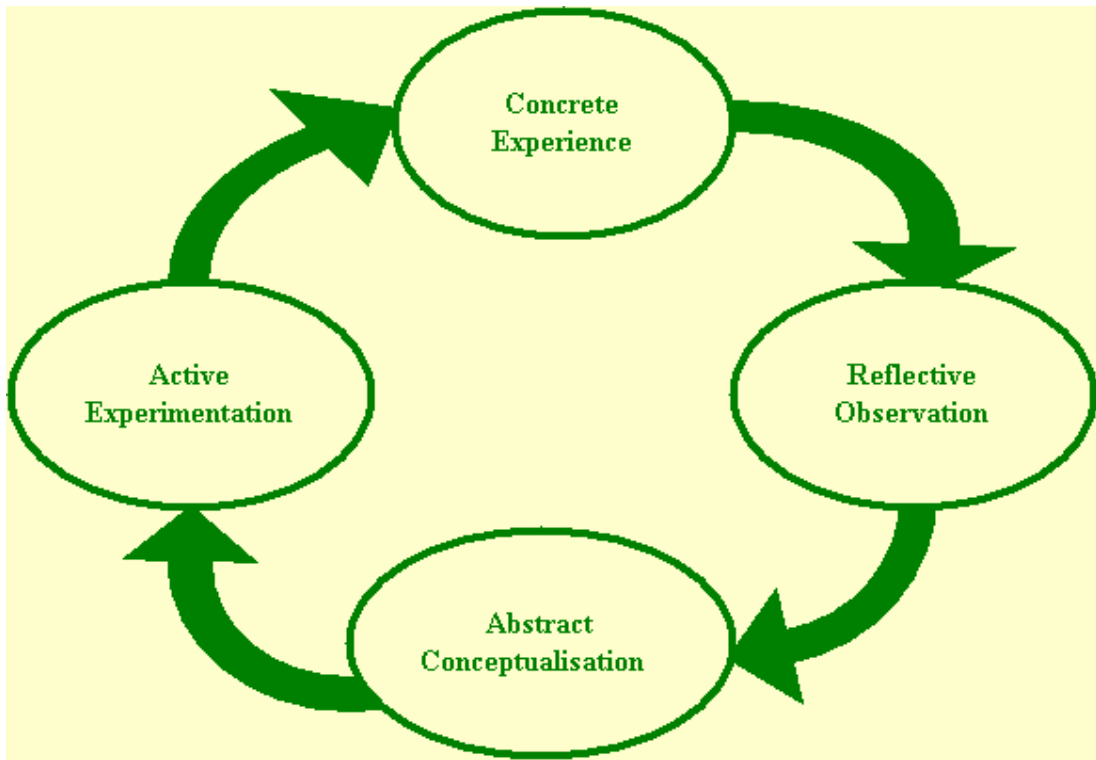
Click here for diagram source / website link.

A complete learning experience in this view begins with a concrete experience of the world, which is then reflected on internally, which in turn leads to abstract conceptualisation leading to active experimentation. This then leads to further concrete experiences which are then reflected on and so the cycle continues (see Moon 1999, pp 24-25 for summary).

Another way to look at the learning that takes place as a result of reflective practice has been presented by Clarkson. The learning cycle in this version proceeds from awareness via accommodation to assimilation. A growing awareness of one's "unconscious incompetence" begins this cycle and this involves "*the assessment of learning needs and an awareness of gaps, confusion or errors in skills and knowledge*" (Clarkson 1994 p.56)

This stage gives way to the stage of accommodation, which sees unconscious incompetence develop into conscious competence. This happens when people become "*painfully aware of all the mistakes one is making and how much there is still to*

learn" and this creates openness to new learning and a willingness to consciously practise new skills. The final stage is where conscious competence gives way to unconscious competence whereby the "*new learning or new skills is absorbed by the person into the self so that it is incorporated and becomes part of the self*" (Clarkson 1994 p.57)

In summary, then, we can say that a model of learning from theories and ideas alone, represented in a traditional schooling approach to learning, is not appropriate to the kind of learning on a course such as this one. Rather the learning tends to take place by means of reflection on the experiences that constitute professional life. This learning tends to follow a pattern of action followed by reflection followed by more informed action, and so much of the learning that takes place will demand a high capacity for reflection on your part.

Supporting the Adult Learner

Returning to education, as we saw in Unit 2, is never easy. However, it is particularly challenging when an individual's work and professional identity are the focus of study. All learners on the course juggle the demands of full-time work, relationships, family commitments and the course. For many learners it is their first experience of third level education. Sometimes they are the first in their community and family to engage in further education. It can be a highly anxiety-provoking experience that leaves many feeling they have not the skills, motivation or intelligence to succeed. The first assignment, and more significantly, the first taped assignment, can provoke despair and frustration. This can be quite a disorienting experience that creates an amount of disequilibrium for course participants.

However, as many adult learning theorists have highlighted, learning is an intrinsically emotional business. Kovan and Dirkx (2003) for example, recognise that emotions are "an important source of knowledge" and comment on the encounter with "not knowing" in professional life that can lead to depth learning (p108, p114).

Mezirow (2000) offers the following as hallmarks of Transformative Learning in adult life:

- A disorienting dilemma
- Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
- A critical assessment of assumptions
- Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- Planning a new course of action
- Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
- Provisional trying of new roles
- Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

 (Mezirow, 2000 p.22)

Editor's Note:

The work of Mezirow and his concept of transformative learning will be discussed in Unit 3 of Module 1

In other words, then, some form of confusion and doubt is inevitable on a course where reflective practice and transformational learning are operative. Claxton recognises the confusion, doubt and perplexity that can be engendered by participating in an educational process. He says that learning is "an intrinsically emotional business" and that "engaging with something unknown always involves a risk - sometimes slight, sometimes grave". Claxton underlines the need for "resilience" in the face of such doubt and confusion and says:

That is why resilience, the ability to tolerate these emotions, is so important. Even when learning is going smoothly, there is always the possibility of surprise, confusion, frustration, disappointment or apprehension - as well, of course, as fascination, absorption, exhilaration, awe or relief. (Claxton 1999, pp 14-15)

It is not uncommon on this course that participants experience a level of confusion and doubt, often referred to as a feeling of being de-skilled. In some ways this phenomenon is akin to experienced golfers being asked to change their 'golf swing'. In our experience, however, as Mezirow and Claxton recognise, such feelings of doubt and distress are a sign that new learning is taking place and therefore they are experiences to be embraced rather than disowned. In fact the more we take responsibility for these feelings, the more productive will be the learning that takes place.

We believe that the emotions of the learner are crucial to the learning process and are a valuable source of learning. In creating opportunities for learners to identify and examine their feelings in relation to their own learning it is possible to encourage them to think about the learning process. We believe that when learners are more conscious of their feelings and emotions then there is less possibility of acting out of them in an unconscious and destructive way. The increased self-awareness leads to increased responsibility for directing one's own learning. It also encourages a real understanding of complex concepts in interpersonal work, such as transference, counter transference, resistance and critical reflection.

This increased self-awareness is an essential tool in working with clients who can put enormous pressure on practitioners to "sort" out their problems. If the learner can tolerate and understand his/her own emotional responses then there is more hope that he/she will be able to tolerate the client's feelings and pressure and maintain a professional identity. The capacity to stay alive to one's emotional development will greatly enhance one's openness to ongoing support and critical reflection. It should hopefully contribute to a reduction in burnout and a healthier thinking practitioner

Creating a Trusting Learning Relationship in the Group Setting

Relationship is at the core of the guidance process. It is vital that the guidance practitioner has the capacity to establish and maintain a relationship with his/her client, where they will have an opportunity to explore their career, education and training options. The course attempts to model this relationship by encouraging learners to identify their own learning needs in a supportive way, but also providing critical feedback, encouragement and challenge when needed. This is achieved by developing a trusting relationship where learners can engage collectively in critically reflecting on their work. As in the guidance relationship, particular attention is placed on establishing learning contracts, the identification and maintenance of boundaries and an openness to deal with issues as they emerge.

All of the learning on the course takes place within a group setting. The group has a wealth of experience and knowledge that is greater than any contribution from staff. The group members can draw on this experience and knowledge, and support and challenge each other in reflecting on their work and approaches. It is much easier at times to receive challenge from a peer than from a member of staff. It is very helpful for the individual learner to:

- Know that he/she is not the only one struggling
- Hear how others are coping with being on the course
- Realise that the client continually challenges others

In the group it is easier to realise that there are no perfect answers or approaches. This is especially apparent in the peer supervision and case study sessions. All learners present a client for critique and on completion of this session realise that there any a number of possible ways of responding to a client. In the group individuals are encouraged to think about the situation, to understand more about their own reactions and feelings and then how to respond. The group members can ask the probing questions and look for greater clarity on the situation. Group members can also empathise with the dilemmas learners encounter with their clients as many have dealt with similar scenarios.

Finally, in many situations it is often the group members who are the first to realise that a fellow learner is in difficulty and will provide the necessary support, practical and emotional, to get the student through.

Supervision

The standard approach to continuous professional development in the field of counselling and of guidance and counselling is supervision, which in turn is characterised in the literature as a form of adult learning. Some understanding of supervision is fundamental to an appreciation of the learning that takes place on this course, especially in the case review sessions.

Zorga is one commentator who has developed supervision outside the psychotherapeutic process:

In this context, supervision is understood as a specific learning, developmental and supportive method of professional reflection and counselling, enabling professional workers (school counsellors, teachers, child care workers, psychologists, social workers etc.) to acquire new professional and personal insights through their own experiences. It helps them to integrate practical experiences with theoretical knowledge and to reach their own solutions to the problems they meet at work, to face stress efficiently and to build up their professional identity. By this, supervision supports professional as well as personal learning and development of professional workers.

(Zorga, 2002 p.265)

Zorga refers to this as the "developmental-educational models of supervision" and proposes that there are two important elements, which are "the experiential learning process and the role of reflection in it". She opposes this model to the administrative model of supervision, recognising that they both share the same aim, "to provide the best possible service" but the Developmental-educational model equips the professional with the knowledge and skills to enable them to work effectively.

(Zorga, 2002 p.266)

Zorga outlines possible models of practice for the supervision but emphasises that supervision is most effective when it is based on reflection on something in our work life that "we cannot explain to ourselves, which we are constantly emotionally and mentally involved with, or we simply wish to learn from" The role of the supervisor in this model is to facilitate us to reflect on our experience in such a way "as to enable us to learn about ourselves and our professional functioning from it" This happens by means of:

- Reflecting on the causes and circumstances, the background to the issue
- Reflecting on what we were trying to achieve, why we acted in certain ways or made certain decisions
- Reflecting on the consequences of actions for all parties
- Reflecting on our feelings and those of others

(Zorga, 2002 p.267)

Zorga summarises the process as follows:

In the reflection process we are able to contemplate the experiences from a distance. We can thus meet the background of our action and the forces which have, again and again, led us to behavioural patterns we might not like nor are they professionally adequate. Reflecting on a concrete experience we can face our defences, emotional contents and behavioural styles. We can recognise our implicit theories, underlying attitudes and values directing our actions and emotional responses, as well as define the frame of reference through which we perceive the events and behaviour of others. In the supervision process we discover the true meaning of a certain event for ourselves personally and how it has influenced our professional action.

(Zorga, 2002 p.267)

Conclusion

Vaill (1996) defines learning as the changes a person makes in himself or herself that increases the know-why and/or the know-what and/or the know-how the person possesses with respect to a given subject. Vail argues for a learning process that encourages people to develop a capacity to restore a sense of meaning in the new chaotic environment. In our professional lives we increasingly work in such environments. This course attempts to provide a learning structure that encourages learners to:

- Think about their work
- Critique their skills and approaches
- Deepen their self-awareness
- Develop new knowledge and approaches
- Familiarise themselves with a theoretical framework
- Take responsibility for their ongoing professional development and learning.

This is achieved by placing the learner at the core of the learning process, by valuing their experience and skills, by the development of trusting and confidential relationships where learners are encouraged to explore the cognitive and emotional impact of learning. As individuals we do not have all the answers, but we hope in a group setting that learners are encouraged to devise the best strategies for their own situation and to become reflective practitioners.

Finally, during the Introductory Workshop you will be encouraged and facilitated to reflect on your motivation for undertaking the course. Some of the aspects you will reflect on are:

- Your thoughts and feelings as you begin the course
- Your aims and objectives for doing the course
- The place of the course in your own career path and development

In the light of these reflections you will be asked to conduct your first **Portfolio Learning Activity.**

What is a Portfolio Learning Activity?

At the end of most units you will be asked to complete an assignment (portfolio learning activity) based on the material presented. These assignments provide you with the opportunity to demonstrate:

- **Your understanding of the theoretical and practical elements of the home-based distance learning materials**
- **Your capacity to reflect critically on this material in the light of your work experiences**

At the end of the course, as part of the assessment process, you will be required to submit a portfolio containing these completed assignments.

Bibliography

Ali, L. and Graham, P. (I996) *The Counselling Approach to Adult Guidance*, Routledge, London.

Boud, D. et al (1993) *Using Experience for Learning* OUP.

Boud, D. (2001) "Using Journal Writing to enhance Reflective Practice" *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* No. 90 Summer, pp.9-17

Brookfield, S. (1995) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Clarkson, P. (1994) *The Achilles Syndrome: Overcoming the Secret Fear of Failure*, Dorset, Element.

Claxton, G. (1999) *Wise Up: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning*, London: Bloomsbury.

Department of Adult and Community Education (2003), Self-Assessment Report, NUIM Quality Review.

Inskipp, F. and B. Proctor, (1993) *The Art, Craft and Tasks of Counselling Supervision*, Twickenham: Cascade.

Kovan, J. and Dirkx, J. (2003) '"Being Called Awake": The Role of Transformative Learning in the Lives of Environmental Activists"', *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol., 53, No. 2, February, pp.99-118.

Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative Dimensions Of Adult Learning*, San Franscisco, Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1990) *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A guide to Transformative and Emancipatory learning*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2000) "Learning to think Like an Adult" in Mezirow, J and Associates *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, San-Fransisco, Jossey-Bass, p.22

Miller, N. and Boud, D., *Working with Experience: Animating Learning*, London: Rouledge, 1996.

Moon, J. (1999)*, Reflection in Learning and Professional Development: Theory and Practice*, London, Kogan-Page, 1999.

Schon, D. (2002) "From Technical Rationality to Reflection-in-action" in *Supporting Lifelong Learning: Volume 1, Perspectives on Learning*, London: Routledge Falmer,

Tudor, K. and Worrall, M. (2004) *Freedom to Practise: Person-Centred Approaches to Supervision*, Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.

Vaill, P., (1996) *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in Permanent White Water*, San Franscisco, Jossey-Bass.

Walker, D., (1985) "Writing and Reflection", in D. Boud, R. Keogh and D. Walker (eds) *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*, Sydney: Kogan Page.

Scaife, J., *Supervision in the Mental Health Professions: A Practitioner's Guide*, Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2001.

Zorga, S. (2002) "Supervision: The Process of Life-long Learning in Social and Educational Professions", *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, Vol. 16, No. 3. pp. 265-276.