

Learning from Real-World Ethical Dilemmas

A Teaching and Learning Framework for Applied Ethics in Social Work Education

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Abstract

This document sets out a complete, ready-to-use teaching and learning framework for applied ethics education in social work, developed and taught across two cohorts of MSW students at Maynooth University. The framework is built around a seven-week, scaffolded, experiential structure: students identify a real ethical dilemma from their own practice placement, work through it in a small group using a consistent structured template, and present their finished analysis to a wider student audience, alongside an individual, four-lens Weekly Reflection Journal completed progressively across the module. The framework is grounded in Universal Design for Learning principles, constructivist pedagogy, and Fook and Gardner's (2007) model of critical reflection, and is designed to build and assess professional competence directly, self-directed learning, structured small-group collaboration under real disagreement, and sustained individual reflection, rather than through a single essay or exam. This document includes the full weekly teaching plan, in-class exercise scaffold, reflection journal structure, assessment rubrics, and a complete foundational reference appendix, and is offered for other social work educators to use, adapt, and build upon in their own teaching contexts.

Keywords: applied ethics, social work education, curriculum design, reflective practice, experiential learning

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A Note for Educators Wishing to Adapt This Framework

This framework was built for a specific module, but very little of its underlying structure is specific to ethics teaching alone. If you are considering adapting it for your own module, the following elements are the most readily transferable:

- **The seven-week scaffold itself**, moving from foundational grounding, through case selection and framework application, to a group decision, individual and collective reflection, and a live presentation, can be adapted to any module built around a real, practice-based case a student group works through collaboratively over time.
- **The four-lens reflective structure** (Notice, Realise, Connect, Sit with it) is not specific to ethical content, and could be applied to reflective journals in placement modules, practice skills modules, or any module asking students to track their own developing thinking across a sustained period.
- **The in-class exercise scaffold's principle**, that each week's exercises should produce material students carry forward and use directly in their final assessed output, rather than standalone activities, is a general design principle worth adapting regardless of subject content.
- **The assessment split** (a collaborative group output marked as a shared product, alongside an individually authored, progressively assessed reflective journal) is a genuinely general-purpose alternative to essay-based assessment, discussed further in a related paper, *Beyond the Essay: Why Social Work Education Needs to Move Away from Polished Writing as Its Default Measure of Competence* (O'Driscoll, in preparation).

If you adapt this framework, in whole or in part, please cite this document using the suggested citation above, and the author would welcome hearing how it has been used or

adapted; please feel free to make contact via the Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University.

This module is built around a small-group, in-class assignment. Each week your group will work step by step through a real-world ethical dilemma using guided exercises. You will debate, analyse, and reflect together, with your work leading towards a final Group Presentation to Year 1 students. Alongside the group work, you will keep a short individual Weekly Reflection Journal, tracking your own thinking as it develops across the module. Your preparation for each session is simple: do the recommended reading so you can contribute fully to your group. All the real work happens in class.

A note on research: anonymised Weekly Reflection Journal material may, with your separate consent and subject to ethical approval, also inform research into how this module is designed and taught. Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary and has no bearing on your grade; you can decline or withdraw consent at any time without needing to give a reason.

The Weekly Reflection Journal: How to Approach It

The journal is not asking you to summarise what happened each week. It is asking what happened *in you*: what you noticed, what shifted, what connected, and what you're still sitting with. Each entry uses the same four lenses, applied to that week's content. Using the same four lenses every week is deliberate, so that your entries are genuinely comparable across the module, not seven unrelated pieces of writing.

- **Notice** — What happened this week, in the case, the group, or in yourself? Start with plain observation, before interpretation.
- **Realise** — Was there a moment your thinking shifted? Something you hadn't seen before, about the case, about ethics, or about yourself? ("I never realised that I...")
- **Connect** — Did something a group member said make you feel understood, or realise others felt the same way? Or did a perspective genuinely differ from your own land for the first time?
- **Sit with it** — What frustrated you, felt hard, or left you uneasy this week? You don't need to resolve it here. Naming it honestly is the point.

This structure is adapted from Fook and Gardner's (2007) model of critical reflection, which is built around surfacing the assumptions underneath our thinking, not just describing events. Notice and Sit with it give you room to describe and stay with difficulty rather than rush past it; Realise and Connect are where the critical reflection itself happens, the moment an assumption becomes visible, to you or between you and the group.

Each week's prompt below gives you a specific anchor for these four lenses, tied to that week's content, but you are not restricted to it. If something else entirely is what you noticed, realised, connected with, or are sitting with that week, write about that instead.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module you will be able to:

1. Identify and analyse real-world ethical dilemmas in social work practice.
 2. Apply multiple ethical frameworks to evaluate complex decisions.
 3. Justify and defend an ethical decision using legislation, codes of ethics, and theory.
 4. Collaborate effectively in groups to reach consensus and manage disagreement.
 5. Reflect critically on personal and professional values as an ethical practitioner.
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Teaching and Learning Framework: Weekly Plan

Week 1: Introduction, Why Ethics Matters

In class:

- Explore why ethics matters in social work.
- Examine the core ethical principles and relate them to social work (beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy).
- Identify personal and professional social values, considering both traditional and emancipatory perspectives.
- Share examples from placements where you experienced tension, uncertainty, or conflict regarding values.
- Begin to define what constitutes an ethical dilemma.
- Explore current approaches to resolving dilemmas in practice.

Preparation reading:

- Banks, S. (2020). *Ethics and Values in Social Work* (5th ed.), Chapter 1.
- International Federation of Social Workers. (2018). *Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles*.
- Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) Code of Ethics.

Weekly Reflection Journal:

- *Notice* — What came up today when you thought about your own values?
- *Realise* — Where did you notice tension between your personal and professional values, that you hadn't named before?
- *Connect* — Did anyone else's example resonate with something in your own experience?
- *Sit with it* — Is there a value tension from today that you're still turning over?

Week 2: What is an Ethical Dilemma?

In class:

- Agree on a working definition of an ethical dilemma as a group.
- Share practice examples and assess whether they represent genuine dilemmas.
- Discuss values, rights, and professional responsibilities involved.
- Explore tensions: personal vs. professional values; values vs. agency protocols, policies, or legislation; equally valid but conflicting values; human rights issues requiring “least-worst” options.

Preparation reading:

- Reamer, F. G. (2018). *Ethical Standards in Social Work: A Review of the NASW Code of Ethics* (3rd ed.).
- IASW Code of Ethics.
- CORU Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics.
- McAuliffe, D. (2019). *Interprofessional Ethics: Collaboration in the Social, Health, and Human Services*.

Weekly Reflection Journal:

- *Notice* — What did your group’s case actually turn out to involve, values versus values, values versus rights, or values versus agency protocol?
- *Realise* — Did you initially think this was a dilemma for a different reason than you ended up believing?
- *Connect* — Did the group’s discussion change how you’d have defined “ethical dilemma” on your own?
- *Sit with it* — Is there still uncertainty for you about whether this is a genuine dilemma, or just a hard situation?

Week 3: Analysing the Dilemma and Generating Options

In class:

- Select one group example to explore in depth.
- Identify why it qualifies as an ethical dilemma.
- Brainstorm at least two possible social work responses (Option A and Option B).
- Identify key stakeholders, conflicts, and vulnerabilities.
- Note differences in group members’ views, opinions, and insights.

Preparation reading:

- Banks, S., & Gallagher, A. (2009). *Ethics in Professional Life: Virtues for Health and Social Care*.
- Hugman, R. (2013). *Culture, Values and Ethics in Social Work*.

Weekly Reflection Journal:

- *Notice* — What stood out about how your group narrowed down to this one case?

- *Realise* — Did generating Option A and B reveal something about the case you hadn't seen when it was still just "a dilemma"?
- *Connect* — Did a stakeholder someone else raised change how you saw who was affected?
- *Sit with it* — Is there a stakeholder or vulnerability in this case that still troubles you?

Week 4: Applying Frameworks and Theories

In class:

- Apply ethical frameworks (deontological, utilitarian, virtue, feminist, care, recognition ethics).
- Test how each framework influences your group's evaluation.
- Discuss whether the group has a preferred framework, and which framework feels most operational in your group's actual decision-making, not just in theory.
- Apply core ethical principles (beneficence, social justice, human rights): which feel most important to you personally and to the group, and where do they conflict or overlap?
- Begin structured analysis of Options A and B. For each option, consider in turn:
 - Values, rights, and professional responsibilities, duties and obligations attaching to the option
 - Pros and cons
 - How the option is informed by legislation, policy, theory, and the Code of Professional Ethics
 - Limitations and challenges
 - How the option aligns with, or diverges from, your personal values
 - Potential benefits and expected outcomes

Preparation reading:

- Banks, S. (2020). *Ethics and Values in Social Work*.
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice* (Revised ed.).
- Honneth, A. (1996). *The Struggle for Recognition*.

Weekly Reflection Journal:

- *Notice* — Which ethical framework did you find yourself reaching for first, without quite deciding to?
- *Realise* — Was there a point where your preferred framework didn't quite fit the case, and you had to notice that?
- *Connect* — Did a group member favour a different framework, and did that shift how you saw the case?

- *Sit with it* — Is there a version of this case where your framework would have led somewhere you're not comfortable with?

Week 5: Making the Decision

In class:

- Compare Option A and Option B using legislation, policy, theory, and codes of ethics.
- Decide as a group which option you would choose and why.
- Set out your planned social work response.
- Reflect: Was the choice easy or difficult? Why?
- Consider group processes: Was everyone heard? How was disagreement handled?

Preparation reading:

- Reamer, F. G. (2018). *Social Work Values and Ethics* (5th ed.).
- Banks, S. (2012). *Ethics and the Social Professions*.
- Relevant national policy/legislation (e.g., Children First Act; Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act).

Weekly Reflection Journal:

- *Notice* — What actually happened in your group as you moved toward a decision?
- *Realise* — Did you personally lean toward the option the group didn't choose, at any point?
- *Connect* — Was there a moment you realised someone else in the group had been thinking something similar to you, or very differently?
- *Sit with it* — Was the final choice easy or difficult for you personally, even if the group reached it smoothly?

Week 6: Reflection and Presentation Preparation

In class:

- Present the steps your group took in ethical decision-making.
- Share your group's framework for resolving dilemmas and insights for practice.
- Identify remaining issues, challenges, or unresolved tensions.
- Reflect individually first, then share insights as a group. Each participant might consider:
 - Did I think through the issues raised by these exercises to the best of my ability?
 - Did I make my views heard? Did I encourage and facilitate others to be heard?
 - Did I consider alternative viewpoints to those I hold strongly?
 - What did I learn about myself as an ethical practitioner? As a team member?
- Reflect as a group on the collaborative process:

- How was the group process positive, collaborative, or robust, and where was it difficult?
- What did you find most challenging about the exercises themselves, for example, unclear guidelines, uncertainty about the “right” ethical option, or the pace at which guidance was given?
- What could improve this project and maximise the learning, for next year’s students and for you?
- Finalise presentation content and rehearse for the showcase.
- Each group member takes responsibility for presenting one or more slides, covering the presentation’s core components between them.

Preparation reading:

- Schön, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner*.
- Fook, J., & Gardner, F. (2007). *Practising Critical Reflection: A Resource Handbook* (2nd ed.).
- Selected articles from the *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*.

Weekly Reflection Journal:

- *Notice* — What did preparing for the showcase bring up for you, as a practitioner and as a team member?
- *Realise* — Is there something you’ve learned about yourself across this module that surprised you?
- *Connect* — Did anything said in this week’s group or class reflection make you feel less alone in a doubt or frustration you’d been carrying?
- *Sit with it* — What are you still unsure about, going into the showcase?

Week 7: Presentation Showcase

The presentation provides a succinct way to showcase your ethical analysis and learning. The showcase is a peer-learning event where Year 2 students present to Year 1, using real-world dilemmas to spark questioning and reflection. Defending and explaining decisions during Q&A will help you consolidate your own understanding.

Weekly Reflection Journal (final entry):

- *Notice* — Looking back across all seven weeks, what pattern do you notice in your own thinking?
- *Realise* — What has actually changed in how you think about ethical decision-making, and about yourself as a future practitioner?
- *Connect* — Where did you discover that a struggle you thought was personal was actually shared, by your group, by the class, or by the profession?
- *Sit with it* — What are you carrying forward from this module that you haven’t fully resolved, and that’s okay?

Supported by THRIVE, Maynooth University's Student Success Project Fund, which has been developed to encourage schools, departments, and professional services to develop projects that positively impact student engagement, partnership, and success.

Overview

This module uses real-world ethical dilemmas to help you develop critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and professional reflection skills. Assessment has two components: a Group Presentation (60%), delivered live to Year 1 peers, and an individual Weekly Reflection Journal (40%), tracking your own thinking as it develops across the seven weeks. The presentation demonstrates what your group concluded together; the journal captures what you, individually, made of the process.

Assessment Components

Group Presentation: 60% of module grade Weekly Reflection Journal: 40% of module grade

Presentation Assignment Objective

To demonstrate your ability to:

- Identify and analyse an ethical dilemma in social work
- Apply ethical frameworks and codes of practice
- Justify and defend a decision
- Reflect on group collaboration and personal/professional learning

Weekly Reflection Journal Objective

To demonstrate your ability to:

- Track your own ethical reasoning as it develops, week by week, rather than reconstruct it after the fact
- Distinguish your individual view from your group's collective position, including where they differed
- Reflect honestly on what you found difficult, not only what went well
- Apply the module's four-lens reflective structure (Notice, Realise, Connect, Sit with it), adapted from Fook and Gardner's (2007) model of critical reflection, to your own learning process

Presentation Assignment: Instructions

Group Work

- Groups of 6 students.

- Each member responsible for preparing and delivering one or more slides, covering the content areas set out below between them as a group.
- Slide 7 (Key Messages) prepared and presented collaboratively, as a group summary.
- Use concise, clear, and evidence-based content, spoken and written.
- A presentation slide template will be provided by Breda O'Driscoll.

Presentation Content Guide

Each group's presentation should run to approximately 15 to 20 minutes in total (roughly 2 to 3 minutes per slide, adjusted for group size), followed by Q&A. Content areas, in order:

1. **The Ethical Dilemma** (1 slide)
 - Case description
 - Why it is an ethical dilemma
 - Values, rights, responsibilities in tension
 - Stakeholders (bullets encouraged)
2. **Option A** (1 slide)
 - Description, pros, cons, ethical reasoning
3. **Option B** (1 slide)
 - Description, pros, cons, ethical reasoning
 - Optional: other alternatives (brief note)
4. **Ethical Analysis** (1 slide)
 - Apply 2 to 3 ethical frameworks (e.g., deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, ethics of care, recognition ethics)
 - Explain how frameworks influenced your group's evaluation
5. **Decision** (1 slide)
 - Chosen option and rationale
 - Supporting codes, legislation, policies
6. **Reflection** (1 slide)
 - Step-by-step account of group decision-making
 - Insights about ethical frameworks and reasoning
 - Remaining issues or tensions
 - Learning outcomes: ethical decision-making, group collaboration, personal/professional values
7. **Key Messages** (1 slide, delivered collaboratively)
 - 3 to 4 clear, actionable insights derived from the dilemma, one sentence each
8. **References** (1 slide)
 - 3 to 5 key sources used to justify decisions and ethical analysis, APA 7th edition

Visual suggestions (optional): scales of justice, decision pathway, team collaboration icon, or other imagery that supports rather than distracts from the spoken content.

Marking Rubric: Group Presentation (60%)

Component	Weight	Criteria
Ethical Dilemma	6%	Clear description of dilemma, ethical tensions, stakeholders
Option A	6%	Logical, detailed, pros/cons, ethical reasoning
Option B	6%	Logical, detailed, pros/cons, ethical reasoning
Ethical Analysis	6%	Application of multiple frameworks; explanation of influence
Decision	6%	Justification using evidence from codes, legislation, policy, theory
Group Reflection Slide	6%	Critical analysis of decision-making and group learning
Key Messages	6%	Concise, clear, actionable insights
Group Contribution: In Class	9%	Active engagement, collaboration, participation
Group Contribution: Presentation Showcase	9%	Clarity, professionalism, delivery, use of slides, Q&A engagement

Marking Rubric: Weekly Reflection Journal (40%)

Component	Weight	Criteria
Completion	10%	All seven weekly entries submitted on time
Depth of Critical Reflection	15%	Genuine engagement with all four lenses (Notice, Realise, Connect, Sit with it); goes beyond description to real insight, not just event summary
Development Across the Module	10%	Evidence of thinking changing, sharpening, or being challenged over the seven weeks, not a single static view repeated
Individual Voice	5%	Reflection is genuinely the student's own perspective, distinguishable from the group's collective position

The Group Presentation is marked as one shared product for the whole group; there is no individual differentiation between members' slides. Individual accountability is carried entirely by the Weekly Reflection Journal instead. This is a deliberate choice: reaching and defending a genuine collective position together, the way a team does in real practice, is part of what this assessment is designed to require.

The Weekly Reflection Journal is marked holistically at the end of the module, using the rubric above, rather than graded entry by entry, to keep the marking process manageable while still requiring progressive, week-by-week submission.

- Active participation in all in-class group work and discussions.
- Engagement in ethical debate and peer learning.

- Contribution to consensus-building and critical reflection.

Submission

- Presentation slide deck submitted via Microsoft Forms, provided by Breda O'Driscoll.
 - Completed slide deck submitted on Moodle.
 - Presentation Showcase: present to peers and respond to questions.
 - Weekly Reflection Journal entries submitted individually via Moodle, within 48 hours of each session.
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Appendix: Foundations of Ethics

Ethics Definition: The branch of philosophy concerned with principles of right and wrong behaviour. Author: Beauchamp & Childress (2013) Reference: Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2013). *Principles of biomedical ethics* (7th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Core Ethical Principles for Professionals

- **Beneficence:** Act in ways that promote the well-being of others. *Example: A social worker arranges additional support for a client experiencing mental health challenges.*
- **Non-Maleficence:** Avoid causing harm. *Example: Avoid sharing sensitive client information without consent, even if well-intentioned.*
- **Justice:** Treat individuals fairly and equitably. *Example: Ensuring all clients have equal access to services regardless of background.*
- **Autonomy:** Respect the right of individuals to make informed decisions. *Example: Supporting a client's choice to refuse a particular intervention after discussing risks and benefits.*
- **Fidelity:** Maintain trust, honesty, and professional integrity. *Example: Following through on promises made to a client regarding support and advocacy.*

Social Work Ethics Definition: Principles and standards guiding social workers in professional practice, ensuring actions protect client rights and welfare while upholding professional values. Author: Banks (2020) Reference: Banks, S. (2020). *Ethics and values in social work* (5th ed.). Red Globe Press.

Ethical Practitioner Definition: A social worker who consistently applies ethical principles, professional values, and codes of practice in decision-making and behaviour. Author: Reamer (2018) Reference: Reamer, F. G. (2018). *Ethical standards in social work: A review of the NASW Code of Ethics* (3rd ed.). NASW Press.

Values Definition: Core beliefs or standards guiding behaviour and decision-making in personal and professional contexts. Author: Rokeach (1973) Reference: Rokeach, M. (1973). *The nature of human values*. Free Press.

Social Work Values Definition: Principles underpinning ethical social work practice, including respect, self-determination, justice, and dignity. Author: Thompson (2017) Reference: Thompson, N. (2017). *Understanding social work values: Individual, professional, and organisational perspectives* (2nd ed.). Palgrave.

Traditional Values (Thompson, 2017)

- Individualization: Treating each client as a unique person.
- Purposeful Expression of Feelings: Encouraging appropriate emotional expression.
- Controlled Emotional Involvement: Maintaining professional boundaries.
- Acceptance: Respecting clients without judgement.
- Non-judgemental Attitude: Avoiding biases in practice.
- Client Self-Determination: Supporting client autonomy.
- Confidentiality: Protecting client information.
- Respect for Persons: Upholding human dignity.
- Congruence: Aligning beliefs and actions in practice.
- Empathy: Understanding clients' perspectives.
- Unconditional Positive Regard: Valuing clients without conditions.

Emancipatory Values (Fook & Gardner, 2007)

- Equality: Ensuring fair treatment and opportunities.
- Social Justice: Challenging oppression and inequity.
- Partnership: Collaborating with clients as active participants.
- Citizenship: Supporting client participation in society.
- Empowerment: Enabling clients to take control over their lives.

Respect for Dignity of People Definition: Recognising and upholding the intrinsic worth of every individual. Author: Banks (2020) Reference: Banks, S. (2020). *Ethics and values in social work* (5th ed.).

Professional Integrity Definition: Maintaining ethical standards, accountability, trustworthiness, and professional boundaries. Author: Reamer (2018) Reference: Reamer, F. G. (2018). *Social work values and ethics* (5th ed.). NASW Press.

Ethical Dilemma Definition: A situation in which two or more social work values conflict, requiring a choice where not all values can be upheld equally, where the need to follow agency protocols, legislation, and so on goes against personal and/or professional values. Example: Conflict between self-determination and confidentiality for a suicidal client. Author: Banks (2012) Reference: Banks, S. (2012). *Ethics and the social professions* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Human Rights Definition: Fundamental rights inherent to all individuals, forming the basis for ethical social work practice. Author: United Nations (1948) Reference: United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Professional Responsibilities Definition: Duties arising from codes, legislation, and best practice standards, including accountability to clients, colleagues, and society. Author: International Federation of Social Workers (2018) Reference: International Federation of Social Workers. (2018). *Global social work statement of ethical principles*.

Ethical Codes Definition: Written standards guiding social workers' conduct and responsibilities. Author: NASW (2017) Reference: National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Code of ethics*. NASW Press.

Ethical Principles Definition: Foundational guidelines informing decision-making, including autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and fidelity. Author: Beauchamp & Childress (2013) Reference: Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2013). *Principles of biomedical ethics* (7th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Ethical Frameworks

Framework	Definition	Author	Reference
Deontological Ethics	Focus on duties, rules, obligations	Kant (1785)	Kant, I. (1785). <i>Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals</i> . Harper & Row.
Utilitarian Ethics	Decisions are right if they maximize overall happiness/welfare	Mill (1863)	Mill, J. S. (1863). <i>Utilitarianism</i> . Parker.
Virtue Ethics	Emphasizes character and moral virtues rather than rules	Aristotle (c. 350 BCE)	Aristotle. (c. 350 BCE). <i>Nicomachean ethics</i> . Oxford University Press.
Feminist Ethics	Focuses on relationships, care, challenging gendered power dynamics	Gilligan (1982)	Gilligan, C. (1982). <i>In a different voice</i> . Harvard University Press.
Ethics of Care	Emphasises empathy, care, responsiveness to vulnerability	Tronto (1993)	Tronto, J. C. (1993). <i>Moral boundaries</i> . Routledge.
Recognition Ethics	Values mutual respect, recognition, social inclusion	Honneth (1996)	Honneth, A. (1996). <i>The struggle for recognition</i> . MIT Press.

Guides to Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work

- **Banks' Model:** Identify dilemma → Consider stakeholders → Apply frameworks → Weigh options → Decide → Reflect (Banks, 2020)
- **Reamer's Process:** Gather facts → Identify values → Consult codes/policy → Consider consequences → Make justified choice → Document & reflect (Reamer, 2018)
- **Reflective Practice:** Schön (1983): Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action to evaluate ethical practice

Learning from Practice / Real-World Examples Definition: Using case studies, capstone projects, and field experiences to translate ethical theory into practical decision-making.
Author: Fook & Gardner (2007) Reference: Fook, J., & Gardner, F. (2007). *Practising critical reflection: A resource handbook* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.