



Practice Learning Qualifications (Social Services) Communication Resource Development

Discussion of the supervision meeting – Stage 3

(i) Identities & difference

We all have a set of identities or ‘selves’ which we bring to social encounters. We make choices (consciously and unconsciously) to ‘play’ up one identity over another at different times and in different situations. And the selves which we are able to use are affected by the selves of the other/s in a social situation (Reinharz 1997).

Drawing on Reinharz’s ideas, Jean brings different selves to her encounter with Nazra. Although it is the ‘practice teacher based self’ which Jean will wish to put to the fore in her meeting with Nazra, the other bits of herself are still there, and will impact on the communication throughout:

- Her practice teacher based self (being a practice teacher, being a listener etc)
- Her brought self (being a mother, soon to be a grandmother, being in her 50s, being white, being a socialist etc)
- Her situationally created self (being tired, being menopausal, being someone with a large caseload etc)

Exercise

Think about the selves that you bring to your work with students. Which would you wish to forefront, and which might you wish to tone down a little? And why?

Communication isn’t just affected by identities. It is also affected by difference – for example, by age, ethnicity/‘race’, culture. One of the things which we do all the time is to work from stereotypes or ‘typifications’ – this is explored in Berger and Luckman’s classic study of the social construction of reality. When we meet someone for the first time, we make up our minds about them within the first 15 seconds, on the basis of their age, gender, accent, hairstyle, clothing etc etc. And having decided who they are, we then make up whole stories about who we think they are, and how they will behave. So we think we know how ‘young people’ will act; we can predict how a ‘working-class person from urban Scotland’ might feel in a given situation. But can we??

This is important in thinking about our communication with students (and, of course, with service users). This is not to suggest that we are prejudiced or discriminatory in any kind of conscious way; instead, we need to acknowledge that this is something about human behaviour which goes on all the time.

Exercise

Look at the photographs of ‘Nazra’, ‘Jean’ and ‘Paul’; then, being honest with yourself, see how many aspects of each person’s fictional biography you have created in your mind. When you have completed this you can check it against the real ‘selves’.

Nazra: is from a middle-class, educated background. When she was an undergraduate student, she made use of student counselling services to help her to cope with extreme anxiety and unhappiness about her course.

Jean: is from a working-class background. There was no expectation that she would stay on at school or go to university. When she was doing her Access course, she discovered for the first time that she has dyslexic difficulties. Jean is caring for her elderly mother who lives nearby and is beginning to get forgetful. She has recently had extensive contact with adult services to discuss her mother's care.

Paul: grew up in a lower middle-class family where maintaining appearances was all important. His upbringing was characterised by secrets; it is difficult for him to trust enough to let people know what he really thinks and feels about things. But he has been working with other service users in hospital to begin to see his problems as societal, not just individual.

This exercise raises important issues about power and difference. Whilst Jean may have power over Nazra based on age, experience and ethnicity, Nazra may experience class-related power over Jean. And all three people have experienced (or are currently experiencing) being users of services. So we can get it badly wrong if we act on our assumptions in an unthinking way. Jean and Nazra will have lots of pre-existing ideas about each other which may be changed and challenged as the practice learning develops. It will be important that Jean, as the practice teacher, checks out her own assumptions about Nazra and is not afraid to ask her to explain aspects her own background and culture if this is having an impact on her learning or practice. It will also be helpful if Nazra gains confidence so that she can ask questions of Jean in the same way. And it will be good for Paul to be able to confront both Nazra and Jean as a person of equal standing. His experience with other service users may encourage him to do this.

(ii) Speaking

There are different kinds of speaking, just as there are different kinds of writing.

Thompson (2003: 84-85) calls these 'speech genres'. He suggests that these may include:

- Formal interviews (e.g. for a job)
- Highly ritualized greetings (e.g. about the weather)
- Transactions (e.g. ordering a round of drinks in a pub)
- Tutorials
- Arguments
- Chat-up lines
- General social chit-chat

Each speech genre has its own style or 'rules' and its own forms of language – as we have a social encounter with another person or persons, we may find ourselves moving in and out of different forms and conventions. So when Jean speaks with Nazra, the genre used is probably closest to what Thompson identifies as a tutorial – it is a formal conversation, but probably less formal than a job interview. It may have aspects which are more informal – most likely at the beginning and end of the meeting – and there may be an element of transaction (contract making) too.

Further Information: Speaking

Speaking is a complex business with a huge number of pitfalls if we are not aware of some of the possible issues.

- Rules – through living and learning in social environments we all learn a range of ways of communicating, usually without realising it (unless we move into a different culture and start to be aware of our assumptions about the meanings embedded into communication). Nazra was puzzled when Jean asked her about her experiences of communicating with men in distress. This was because she had not had to think about this before. One of the ‘rules’ of speaking is ‘turn-taking’. In the formal environment of supervision, we observed Jean and Nazra adhering to this rule in a strict way, neither individual interrupted the other. In less formal settings, this ‘rule’ will not be followed in this way, and Nazra in her work with children will have experienced this very differently, and she might have been engaged in assisting children to learn to take turns in talking.
- Power – who is allowed to speak? The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1972) argued that by looking at discourse (that is, ideas and practices) it is possible to identify power and how it works. We have already noticed that in the supervision meeting, it was Jean who held the agenda. This seemed OK for this early stage of the practice learning, but should not be allowed to become a pattern which cannot be shifted. Power isn’t just about who is allowed to speak though. It is also about what can be said, and not said. From Nazra’s point of view, she cannot say that she is absolutely terrified of Paul – after all, what will Jean think of her if she does? It has to be acknowledged that Nazra will be acutely aware in all her communications with Jean that she has the power to pass or fail her practicum. This will have an effect on all her dealings with Jean throughout the period of practice learning, no matter how democratic or warm-hearted Jean may appear to be.
- Phatic communication – this is a linguistic phrase which refers to the small talk that we engage in, often to lead in and out of more formal communication. In our scenario we did not see this aspect between Jean & Nazra, however the pre-supervision process involved in getting a hot drink and ‘small talk’- ‘phatic communication’. For example, Jean might have asked about something social that Nazra had been involved in – as long as this was a non-threatening topic for Nazra. Thompson (2003) notes that phatic communication in Britain can often focus around the weather. Essentially the purpose of this communication is to start in a shallow way to indicate ‘friendliness’ before moving into more depth of communication. Nazra will need to learn – if she does not already do this – to engage in this way with service users. The end of supervision (and contacts with service users) will also be marked by ‘phatic communication’.
- Meaning – Thompson (2003) talks about the three interrelated levels of the personal, cultural and structural contexts for each individual impacting on the meanings that ‘we seek to convey and to those we receive’. At the personal level he talks about ‘identity and emotion’ (which we look at in other places); at the cultural level he considers the ‘the shared meanings, assumptions and understandings which have developed historically in a given community (geographical community, community of interest, or a professional community)’.

One of the aspects of meaning around which any student/learner needs to develop an understanding is that of 'workplace culture'. For example, the way that humour is used within a workplace can be confusing for a student/learner – does it convey disrespect for service users?, is it a way of relieving stress within the private space of an office? In Jean's workplace it will be important that she is able to be objective, stand back and notice the way different 'meanings' could be attached to how her colleagues behave, and to talk to Nazra about these meanings. Thompson's third level is the structural – that is the ways in which power and life chances are distributed in line with social divisions such as 'class, race and gender' (this relates power as described previously)

- 'Politically correct' language – one of the ways in which efforts to challenge discrimination and inequality is often resisted is through deriding the language used within these efforts towards change. Clearly, changes in language in themselves do not change the life chances of communities on the receiving end of unequal treatment, but language is a symbolic part of change processes. In the process between Jean and Nazra there could be a number of areas of difficulty. For example, if Jean has not received, or made use of, education around race equality she could feel nervous about how to talk to Nazra about her ethnic minority identity – language could become a barrier instead of a source of exploration and developed understanding. For Nazra, if Jean, for example, referred to having a 'night out with the girls', and Nazra had specific views about the way women can be infantilised through the use of language and reacted negatively to this phrase, a distance could be created which neither is able to talk about. The way through these difficulties is one that requires an understanding of the way language conveys meaning and that it is a political matter in the sense that it is one of the contested areas in the struggle to define the world.
- Para-language – this refers to the pitch, volume, speed, tone and sound effects which accompany spoken words. You may have noticed that points in supervision where Nazra's speech slows down or becomes quieter she is communicating something to Jean beyond the words she is using. As well as these aspects which accompany speech, there can be different meanings attached to the same words, and learning within specific disciplines requires the development of different understandings about particular words. For example, if Nazra had not studied psychology she might not have understood the phrase 'hearing voices' as anything other than what the actual words suggest, she could have interpreted another worker talking about this as Paul hearing his neighbours next door, rather than an internal process associated with a particular diagnosis within some schools of mental health knowledge.

Exercise

Spend 10 minutes observing people speaking to each other and list your observations.