



Practice Learning Qualifications (Social Services) Communication Resource Development

Discussion of the supervision meeting – Stage 5

(i) Written communication

The example of written communication which we have used in this module is an extract from a reflective diary. Reflective diaries (also called learning logs or journals) are often used in practice teaching to encourage students to reflect on their experiences and their feelings. Sometimes, practice teachers recommend that these diaries are kept private – it is then up to students to choose what material they wish to share with their practice teachers. Mostly, however, reflective diaries are seen as tools for supervision as well as for reflection, and students regularly hand these in before meeting their practice teachers. Nazra's diary entry is not a good example of a reflective piece. It is mainly concerned with her feelings of being out of her depth, and there is very little analysis here, or even reflection on what she has learned from the situation. One helpful way forward might be to ask Nazra to look at her extract again, identifying what she needs to learn to be able to proceed with Paul.

Forms of written communication which are in common usage in practice learning are discussed more fully below including:

- **Agency records**
- **Agency reports**
- **Academic assignments/practice studies/practice reports**
- **Working agreements/learning agreements**
- **Supervision notes**
- **Process recordings**
- **Critical incident analysis**

Further Information: Written Communication

Cree & Macaulay (2000) set down the following different kinds of communication in practice learning:

Agency records: these will need to be written and structured according to agency conventions and styles of writing. These may be typed straight onto a computer database.

Agency reports: again, these are likely to follow a specific format set in advance.

Academic assignments/practice studies/practice reports/portfolios: the format for these will be set by the university at which the student is studying, and will be broadly derived from the standards for social work education. All universities place a high value on the integration of theory and practice, and will expect students to demonstrate that their practice is informed by best, up-to-date research evidence.

Parker (2004: 117) offers the following simple advice on preparing and writing the self-evaluation report:

- Gather evidence, using a wide range of sources
- Use interim reports to monitor development in practice
- Follow guidance given by the university and agency
- Check that the evidence meets the guidelines set by the university
- Write simply and clearly

Working agreements/learning agreements: again, the format for these will vary from university to university, but they will all cover roughly the same kind of material, and this will include:

- Names and contact details
- Details of student's background and learning needs
- Details of learning opportunities
- Practice teaching arrangements
- Expected periods of leave during the practice learning experience
- Practical arrangements (hours of work, study time, accommodation etc)
- Methods of assessment to be used
- Signatures (adapted from Doel et al 1996)

Supervision notes: these may be recorded jointly, with the practice teacher and student taking turns to write, or they may be kept solely by the student. They are likely to include a record of decisions taken in relation to service user contact, and an identification of learning needs and evidence for self-assessment. Parker (2004: 84) offers a useful example of written supervision notes.

Process recordings: these invite students to write a verbatim report of an interview, and at the same time, write down their observations and feelings alongside this account. The process recording is sometimes presented in the form of three columns: the first is what happened (the interaction); the second is thoughts and the third feelings.

Critical incident analysis: here a student describes one specific incident or scenario in depth, giving a highly detailed account of what took place. Any incident can be chosen, because any event or interaction is potentially significant for students as learners.

One framework for a critical incident is as follows:

Identify an incident for reflection and make brief notes on the following:

Describe the event - what happened, where and when, who was involved.
Put this event in its context e.g. what had happened previously, what you had achieved/tried to achieve and your relationships with those involved.
What was your role in the event e.g. as participant, observer, co-worker?
What was the purpose and focus of your intervention at this point?
What did you think and feel at the time about what you were doing?
Did it remind you of any previous experience or learning?
As you look back, what do you think and feel about the outcome?
What have you learned e.g. about yourself, relationships with others, the social work task, organisational policies and procedures?
Are there things which you might do differently in future? What help might you need to achieve this?
What issues out of this reflection will you take to supervision? (in Cree & Macaulay 2000: 141)

Whatever the writing task, students should be encouraged to write as clearly as possible, avoiding jargon, and attending to the question of who the writing is for. An Open University textbook on independent learning recommends that students should always evaluate their written work before it is completed. They must ask themselves:

- What were my purposes in writing this?
- How well have I achieved them?
- How would I change what I researched, planned and wrote if I repeated the exercise?
- Has working on this led to any ideas or questions that I might follow up? (adapted from Marshall & Rowland 1998: 178).

(ii) Communication in group settings

Supervision does not, of course, always happen in a one-to-one context. There are likely to be a range of people involved in assessing a student's work, including a daily supervisor, colleagues, the university, and service users. This means that there will be times when communication has to happen in a group setting, and then all the areas which we have already discussed will be multiplied by the number of people in the interaction.

There is also another issue, however, and that is the way that groups operate to influence the thoughts, feelings and actions of other group members. For more on this, see Douglas (2000). This means that the communication which takes place in groups requires further exploration.