



Personal and professional audit of social work students' core assumptions and values

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Course details

Course title: BSc Social Work

Level: Undergraduate

Year: Years 1 – 3 (The exercise can be tailored accordingly)

Discipline/Subject areas: Social Work

Activity details

What I did

This case study describes an exercise asking social work students to identify their core assumptions, beliefs, values, principles and ethics and resulting attitudes and behaviours that flowed from these.

Why I did it

I have been, personally and professionally, increasingly concerned about the lack of clarity and attention these fundamental areas receive, whether reflecting upon these privately or as part of an academic, professional or practice requirement. I often suspect a tendency towards a rather formulaic, routine-ised, mechanistic and superficial addressing of these core motivators of feeling, thinking and behaviour.

Furthermore, given the scarred history of N. Ireland, I believe that education is one of the few forums that can 'risk' raising some of the underlying 'issues' and address these accordingly!

What I wanted to achieve

A practitioner understanding that their actions need to be predicated upon a well informed and accountable set of assumptions, beliefs, values, principles and ethics. It is the writer's contention that everything a practitioner does is based, consciously or unconsciously, upon their assumptions, beliefs, values, principles and ethics, and far too often this is not addressed through personal or collective agency; despite the various legal, regulatory, policy and procedural exhortations.

A short description of what I did

Students (and lecture / tutor / practice teacher also) are invited to:

1. Define assumptions, beliefs, values, principles and ethics for themselves, drawing upon the literature thereafter and comparing accordingly.
2. Identify their 'Top 10' personal assumptions, beliefs, values, principles and ethics.
3. Identify their 'Top 10' professional assumptions, beliefs, values, principles and ethics.
4. Attempt to prioritise these (1-10) respectively.
5. Individually (and, if agreeable, in group discussion) compare and contrast the similarities and differences between definitions, personal and professional lists, thoughts and feelings, per (dis)agreement, etc.
6. If done as a tutorial exercise, the students are asked to reflect upon the exercise in writing (perhaps as tutorial minutes / summary, etc).
7. I provide some written material on agreed ethical codes, etc. to assist clarity and establish a professionally informed base for future reference and guidance.

What worked well

- Carrying out the task as a citizen was as important as an aspiring practitioner.
- The inculcating of personal and professional responsibility for one's assumptions, beliefs, values, etc.
- Liberating a range of informed / uninformed assumptions and so on that often drove individual / collective behaviour.
- Exposing the lack of uniformity in the literature.
- The breadth and depth of discussion that emerged.
- The centralising of values, principles and ethics as well as identifying 'appropriate' behaviours in relation to self and others.

Problems and/or issues

- The initial exercise can appear to be intrusive, challenging and scary!
- The obvious confusion that surrounds these terms, despite their prevalence within the caring professions vocabulary, regulations, codes and so on.
- Given the nature of the 'NI conflict', inevitable 'issues' arise (including sectarianism, racism)!
- On occasion, oppressive assumptions, comments, beliefs, experiences, etc. are evident and need to be addressed sensitively but forthrightly.
- The lack of real time to discuss these issues more regularly.
- The narrow framing of this area within social work education and practice generally under 'Values' only.

What students thought about it

- Although this is often a challenging personal and professional exercise, the feedback is generally positive; many regularly confiding they had never been asked to consider these concepts previously.
- Many also comment that they were often unaware of their core assumptions, beliefs, values, principles and ethics and surprised at how powerful these were.
- They generally experienced it as a challenge, but appreciated the opportunity to explore these complex concepts at greater depth.
- Being able to share within a supportive and educational environment was viewed as an important component.

- Having the lecturer, tutor etc. share their 'audit' alongside participants, and being willing to offer these as a resource in writing (alongside some theoretical and source material) while remaining open to challenge, was also positively commended.
- The relevance for placement preparation is often cited. Indeed, arguably this exercise encourages a student to more readily embrace the inevitable dilemmas that arise on placement and later practice.
- Occasionally, some students did not see the need to explore their own material, believing doing was more important than thinking or reflecting, and resisted accordingly.
- The proliferation of definitions, descriptions, etc. and resultant ambiguity in the literature confused some, energised others!

Key messages

- Making ones personal and professional assumptions, beliefs, values, principles and ethics transparent is an important contribution to the anti-oppressive practice agenda.
- The more these core elements are made conscious, accountable and open to challenge, the more informed one's practice becomes.
- We are all born relatively broad minded and open hearted, but this soon become socialised and often prejudiced towards some and against others. The need for inter-dependence soon emerges from this journey.
- This is an exercise demanding much of the 'facilitator' as well as students / participants, but is very worthwhile and serves as a significant anchor for future development and practice.
- It is often experienced as a growth experience, and valued accordingly.

Related documents or links

There is a vast range of primary and secondary reference and source material to draw upon. I am willing to share my material with colleagues and students and can be contacted via email (see above).

Any other comments

I highly commend this exercise. I have used it in various environments and with students, practitioners, managers and other personnel; not only in social work but in wider contexts too.

It also serves to contradict some misleading but often reinforced teaching and learning, including that making assumptions is an error (an interesting assumption); discrimination is wrong (when in fact it is important to discriminate in terms of good / bad choices, decisions, etc); and that caring people have to leave behind many of the very assumptions, beliefs, values and principles that brought them into this line of work in the first place!

This exercise can also be varied to include audit of skills, attributes, qualities, etc that one would expect a proficient practitioner to possess, etc.

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