Independent and critical practice

In this essay I will complete an analysis of my development as an independent and critically reflective practitioner by chronology referencing my learning over the past four years of study.

However while all years within this degree have been important to my development as a critically reflective practitioner, I will not discuss year one as I feel that it is not as relevant to this essay as the other years. My discussions will focus around my development and understanding of supervision, how supervision has assisted in my learning to working within an anti-oppressive (AOP) manner through the ' use of self' and how this has developed over the course of my three placements. I will then discuss how I plan to use this knowledge and understanding to continue my professional development. When I started on the course, I felt I knew what it meant to be both critical and reflective, and having worked in social and nursing care for several years prior to commencing the course also thought I had a good understanding of anti-oppressive practice (AOP) which is defined by Thompson (2009: 10) as " an attempt within social work to acknowledge oppression in societies, economies, cultures, and groups, and to remove or negate the influence of that oppression". However, it was in year two and my involvement within the communications module that I realised my understanding was limited as I was introduced to the concept of difference and empathy and was expected to draw upon these terms to guide my practice in a class room scenario. Faced with a class room scenario of a black women who had recently been discharged from a psychiatric hospital and was unhappy about living in a mixed sex supported living home, I found myself focusing upon her mental illness to explain why she was unhappy,

failing to engage with the skills of empathy and failing to acknowledge difference which are described by Trevithick " as entering into another person's frame of reference" (Rogers 1969) and " a process that explores beyond diversity to enable an understanding of how individuality affects personal behaviour and responses" retrospectively (2009: 135). Needless to say that the feedback I received from my tutor and peers was not as I would have hoped, and the word oppressive was used to describe my practice as I drew purely from a medical model which is where my background lies. However this experience gave me my first real opportunity to receive feedback within a social work context and I came to realise that in order to become a critically reflective practitioner and practice anti-oppressively I would have to do more than " complete a check list of procedures" as I had done in previous employment: acknowledging my ' use of self' which is described as " conscious and deliberate reflections on the ways in which own personality traits, attributes, values, beliefs, life experiences, and cultural, ethnic, and religious heritage influence their work with clients" (Trevithick 2009: 57): And critically reflecting upon experiences which is described by Boud " to be an important activity for practitioners to undertake as it allows them to recapture their experience, think about it, mull over and evaluate it" (1985: 43)In the context of my understanding of becoming a critically reflective practitioner, when linked with Kolb's experiential learning theory this can be understood as an important experience within my social work training.

Kolb (1984: 6) states that " Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" and without experience

learning would not happen. From this class room experience it was clear that while I was able to understand theory and terms in a shallow and simplistic way, completing an essay on the subject, I did not understand them properly as I was unable to draw upon them within my practice; which I would contend links to my learning style of accommodator and my need for concrete experience to fully understand abstract concepts. A learning style is described by Pritchard as being " a mode of learning – in which an individual prefers to think, process information and demonstrate learning" (2009: 42). Everyone learns in different ways and for this reason it is important as a student to recognise a particular learning style that is best suited to their needs: With Pritchard believing that " a learner's awareness of learning preference and an understanding of the learning process can lead to improved learning outcomes". While there are many different models that a student can use to help them determine what type of learner they are, within this essay I reference Kolb's experiential learning model as this is what we used to define our learning styles throughout the degree. The model of experiential learning contends that there are four stages which people use to learn based on their experiences and that these are experienced in a cycle, which can be entered into at any of these stages and all stages must be passed though in order to learn. The four stages are concert experience, abstract conceptualisation, reflective observation and active experimentation. " Therefore learning is an active and developmental process, where the responsibility rests with the individual" (Maclean and Harrison 2008: 88).

Kolb's model can be linked to individual preferences for particular learning styles. When tested at the start, middle and end of the course my style of learning has been shown to have changed from the assimilating preference in year 1 to the accommodator in years 2, 3 and 4. Individuals with an assimilating learning style are more attracted to logically sound theories and need time to think things through; and the accommodator likes to use other people's analysis, preferring to take a practical, experiential approach. With an understanding of both these learning styles I most identify with being an accommodator within this learning theory with Pritchard stating that an accommodator is someone who is " person orientated and a hands on learner" (2009: 43). Soon after this experience I entered into my year two placement with a fostering agency, and was surprised to find that I was expected to undertake supervision on a weekly basis. My experience of supervision was limited as I hadn't ever experienced it before, however I understood it to be the " overseeing of work by either a practice teacher or line manager" with Kadushin (1992) stating that it is a two way process in which a supervisor and supervisee meet to complete three functions of " Administration, Education and Support" needs. Carpenter (2010: 82) states that the overall aim of supervision is " to provide the best possible support to service users in accordance with the organisation's responsibilities and accountable professional standards" with Thompson (2009?: 73) arguing that to obtain the most value from supervision a student should be " honest, assertive and prepared". With limited theoretical understanding of what supervision looked like in practice, and no practical experience to complete a learning cycle as suggested by Kolb, my ability to be prepared for supervision was impaired and I made the assumption that my practice

educator (PE) and practice supervisor would teach me what supervision looked like in practice so that I could gain a more concrete understanding and become an active participant within the process.

However as time passed I found myself a passive participant in supervision with my Educator, as my work was scrutinised in comparison to the student that had left the placement before I started and I was told what I needed to do in order to be " more like her". Supervision was structured with empathise on administrative duties, and issues of support and education were only touched upon briefly which lead me to believe that my way of practicing was okay and reflection would only take place if she felt I needed it. However while I believed that my PE would engage in reflective practice if she felt I needed it, there were times I felt I needed to reflect upon thoughts and experiences in accordance with Trevithick's description of ' use of self' (above) as I encountered complex issues regarding foster placements and was reminded of my own time in foster care. I found myself identifying with children who at times were distressed, upset and angry however I felt unable to take this to supervision because of the difficult and critical relationship that had formed between us. Failing to be assertive, failing in having my needs of support and education met and failing to support service users appropriately. Allocated a foster family who had in placement a 15 year old female (known here as K) I was confronted with confusion and upset as every weekend she would run away to her maternal mother's home and be brought back by the police in the early hours of the morning after they appeared to have fallen out. Drawing on my own experiences in care, and my own behaviour when I was K's age, I found myself making excuses for

her, failing to recognise any differences between us or attend to the fosters carers concerns. I felt a need to ' rescue' K and at times forgot that the foster carers were in fact the service use (Karpman 1968 cited in Treivthick 2009) which Trevithick would argue means I failed in " taking up an appropriate position of separateness" (2009: 157).

Without a supportive supervision space in which to reflect upon my own experiences and feeling, which were driving my interaction with the family, it could be argued that my practice was not purposeful with Milner (1989) claiming that " over identification with a service user could see the risk of the social worker failing in their duties to both agency and service user alike by not critically reflecting on ' use of self'". Social work intervention requires the drawing upon ' social work skills, knowledge and values which allows for an appropriate separateness with ' use of self' illuminating the work at hand' avoiding oppressive practice (Shulmen 1999: 156). My understanding and development of supervision as a process in critical reflective practice and AOP consequently remained limited with Dominelle (2002) stating that anti-oppressive practice approaches relies upon the " knowing of oneself in order to engage effectively with others who are different, walking alongside". However it would fair to say that my experience of supervision within this setting was difficult, as I felt under threat of failure as my PE compared me to another student, making remarks that indicated my incompetence in aligning with her expectations. Trevithick (2009: 242) states that in order to develop as a critical reflective practitioner; " practitioner's need space in which reflect upon their own experiences in a safe non-critical environment, free from threat and judgement but encouraged and challenged". Overall

this experience offered very little in terms of my development as a critically reflective practitioner, and I failed the placement; however in year 3 I reflected upon my experiences of supervision within this placement, which Schon (1999: 11) understands " as the process of learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of self and/or practice" with my new PE, and was encouraged and challenged to analysis what I felt went wrong and explore ways of avoiding the same thing happening again; which when considered within my learning and development as a critically reflective practitioner was crucial. I relied upon my PE and supervisor to teach me what supervision was, however I never told them that I didn't know what was expected of me within this process, or that I had little knowledge of applying social work skills or knowledge to practice, which on my part was a failing in being open, honest and assertive and implicated negatively upon my learning experience in developing as critically reflective practitioner. By engaging within this process of reflection I was able to acknowledge my lack of assertiveness as fear of getting it wrong.

Through this process I was able to learn from my mistakes of the previous placement and as a result approached year 4 supervisions differently by clarify the supervisory relationship at an early stage and wrote this up comprehensively into my placement agreement, ensuring that my need for support and education was met. According to Trevithick (2009: 243) due to " lack of uniformity within the supervision process and expectations, it is essential that the purpose of the supervisory relationship between practitioners is clarified at an early stage in order to avoid misunderstandings and uncomfortableness". I would liken this learning to

double loop learning: Which Argyris and Schon (1996 cited in Lymbery and Postle 2008: 233) states to be when " learning involves the modification of personal objectives, strategies or policies so that when a similar situation arises a new framing system is employed". By reflecting upon my experiences in a safe environment I was able modify my understanding of supervision and how I went about approaching supervision, being assertive and having my needs recognised and met within this process. However while I made changes to the way that I prepared and carried out supervision, I could only do this with the support of my PE and supervisor who were much more experienced in the supervision process than me. It could be argued that this followed Vygotes scaffolding learning (cited in Pritchard 2009: 24) theory in which a learner requires the support of a more skilful peer to move to the next level of understanding and is known as the zone of proximal development. In my case, my PE and supervisor encouraged me to take responsibility for planning and setting an agenda for supervision, challenging me to explore different ways of carrying this out which aided and built upon my learning experience. Within this safe space I began to understand supervision as more than information sharing of administrative duties and developed a deeper understanding of it as a shared learning experience between both parties (Trevithick 2009).

My PE and supervisor shared elements of themselves with me which gave me confidence in their openness and honesty which Schon (1999) believes is an important process in order for professional practice to be enhanced. With a deeper understand of supervision as a process and my role within it I approached year 4 with confidence, assertive in having my learning needs

met. My forth year placement was with the Community Mental Health Team for adults of working age and in relation to my learning experience offered me the chance to deepen my understanding of AOP through ' use of self' and integration of theory. I will describe my learning through a single case. I had been allocated W, a 19 year old male who had recently been discharged from a psychiatric hospital to his mother's home; however upon returning to his mother's home the relationship broke down and he was now sofa surfing. Before W was detained under section he had spent many years going between his mother's home and foster carers due to his mother's ill mental health. During my first few supervision sessions with my PE she asked me how my practice with W was anti-oppressive. I found this a difficult question to answer and waffled on about recognising difference in age, gender and life experiences however at times found myself drawing on my own experiences to explain his behaviour as I had done in my first placement.

My PE repeated but ' how' are you practicing in an anti-oppressive manner, but the best I could think of was through use of empathy, listening and understanding. I knew that this was not the answer that my PE was looking for and began to realise that my understanding was still fairly simplistic; and my PE suggested that I should consider W in relation to Thompson's PCS model as this would help. In preparation for my next supervision, I researched the PCS model with W as its basis. This model allowed me to consider W in an ecological framework, considering " the different levels at which discrimination operates and how these levels reinforce each other" (Thompson 2006: 20). I believed that I had a better understanding of W and how discrimination affected him; however I could not see how this was going

to allow me to practice in an AOP manner. This issue was revisited over a number of supervisions, however it wasn't until W had refused to start a training course that I had worked hard at gaining funding for, and the training providers had worked hard supporting him to make appropriate educational choices, that my understanding of this situation was changed. Taking this situation to supervision I couldn't understanding why W was being so short sighted in rejecting his best opportunity to gain independence which is what he claimed to want. In supervision I was encouraged to discuss my own reaction to this situation and was honest, admitting that I was frustrated with W.

I also discussed my concerns in relation to continuing to work with W because I didn't want to overwhelm him with my own feelings with what I thought he should do. During this supervision my PE encouraged me to consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs in which Maslow proposed that " as the more fundamental physical needs are reasonably satisfied, the more abstract personal and psychological needs can be addressed" (Parrish 2010: 139). If I consider W's life on a personal level, his basic needs of safety, security and love had rarely been met, moving between different homes and being rejected by his mentally ill mother which Maslow would argue are his deficiency needs. This model contends that if these deficiency needs are not met then progression to the growth needs is unlikely. Therefore as W was not in a safe and secure place he was unable to cope with the demands of training. When completing the PCS model each week, I had not considered the reality of his life as he understood it, but had used my own values and judgements when considering his reality. This was a light bulb moment for

me, and the first time I understood and could make the link between ' use of self' and theory of social constructionism and my practice with a real person. My frustration with W's inability was to understand the course as his way of gaining independence was based on my own values created from a similar background, however I am now 10 years older with a stable home life and have the privileged of hindsight.

How could I possibility expect W who is still experiencing rejection from his mother and lack of security to make plans for the future when he is so busy trying to survive right now. This became a turning point in my learning. I realised that whilst I had considered W's difficult upbringing, frequently comparing it to my own, I had not considered how this had impacted on his current outlook or ability to move forward. Using supervision to reflect upon this situation I made the connection between the agencies push for service user involvement within employment and training, and my own values, beliefs and experiences. I believed that everybody needed a purpose in their life to be happy based on my own experience however without exploring this issue with W properly this was just an assumption. Gould and Baldwin (2004: 43) argue that to learn; " it is important to let go of long held beliefs even if this is painful". I could not believe how long it had taken me to make this leap of understanding and felt angry with myself for allowing my own experience to limit my learning experiences so dramatically; however I also felt pleased that I was finally beginning to understand AOP. If I had not understood the role of supervision and my role within it, opening myself up to critical reflection and the challenge of another, I might not have made this breakthrough.

Fook (cited in Gould and Baldwin 2004) contends that " reflection must be critical to both deconstruct and reconstruct" and this enables the knowledge informing practice to be judged on its effectiveness. AOP is not about being nice to people but being able to see the world through their eyes. I would equate this learning to double loop learning or transformative learning, which as descried above is " concerned with breaking out of our current mind-set" (Lymbery and Postle 2007: 233). I needed to " adjust my behaviour, goals, norms and assumptions" when considering W's reality (Thompson 2008: 71). With this new understanding I had to re-evaluate all my previous work with W in supervision and for the first time I realised what the PCS model was helping me achieve. I had used the PCS model as something I should complete on behalf of W, drawing upon my values and judgements which had come from a similar background; however completely different because of individual differences. However instead I should have completed it as if I were W, considering how he felt at each level of this model, standing alongside him to make sense of his world. In relation to my understanding of becoming a critically reflective practitioner this experience was a breakthrough, allowing me to make links between how I could use supervision to gain a different perspective of a situation and apply a theoretical framework.

Shulman (1999: 156) argues that " the capacity to be in touch with the service user's feelings is related to the worker's ability to acknowledge his or her own. Before a worker can understand the power of emotions in the life of the client, it is necessary to discover its importance in the worker's own experience". Moving forward into practice this understanding of supervision

and my role within it will prove to be crucial learning as I continue to strive working anti-oppressively. As an individual I am somebody that learns through experience as suggested by my learning style of the accommodator: However with the use of supportive supervision I have come to realise that as long as I critically reflect upon my experiences and continue to develop different perspectives, ' use of self' is an important tool in practicing anti-oppressively and is an important aspect in the development of a ' professional self' which is believed by the SCIE as being an important tool within " the integration of authentic self with those skills and knowledge gained through social work training". Throughout this essay I have demonstrated my development as a critically reflective practitioner by charting my understanding and development of supervision as a process and explored how I came to understand and use supervision to gain a better understanding of my ' use of self' in working anti-oppressively.