# Part One

Essential elements for PQ practice

Patricia Higham

The starting point of social workers' continuing professional development is to understand PQ education and training's structures (Chapter 1), then to consolidate qualifying level practice by emphasising values and ethics (Chapter 2), and forming partnerships with people who use services and their carers (Chapter 3). All three chapters in Part One convey messages that apply across all the specialisms.

Chapter 1 *Continuing professional development and post qualifying social work frameworks: flagships for social work reform or sinking ships?* by Patricia Higham, compares the four country-specific PQ frameworks and argues that PQ practice must differ from that at qualifying level – instead of being preoccupied with 'competence', it should promote critical reflective practice and innovative thinking that moves social workers towards capability and expertise.

Chapter 2 *Consolidating values in PQ practice* by Kish Bhatti-Sinclair discusses values as a continuous thread running through practice, beginning with the qualifying degree, registration on the social care register, and the start of PQ practice. Consolidation of practice, as a first PQ step, helps social workers consider the values dilemmas they will confront in practice.

Chapter 3 *Partnerships with people who use services and carers*, by Patricia Higham and Claire Torkington, explores critical views of user involvement, and argues that social workers must relinquish some of their power (echoing Chapter 2) and form different kinds of relationships with users and carers.
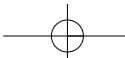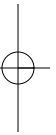
Chapter 1

Continuing professional development and PQ social work frameworks: flagships for social work reform or sinking ships?

Patricia Higham

Introduction

Chapter 1 draws on the international definition of social work (Topss UK Partnership, 2002) to consider the impact of social work reviews on social work roles (and by implication, on how social workers' opportunities for CPD are determined.) The chapter compares the four country-specific social work PQ frameworks for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales that replaced a UK-wide framework, and discusses possible impediments to establishing PQ frameworks as flagships. The last part of the chapter considers whether PQ frameworks can be fit for purpose, citing a lack of agreement on the purpose of PQ, preoccupation with 'competence', and insufficient understanding of why teaching, learning and assessment for PQ must differ from that at qualifying level. To avoid the 'sinking ship' scenario, the chapter suggests that the PQ frameworks should ensure that the practice of a social worker in possession of a PQ award – at any level – will be different from a social worker without PQ.

A workshop (Blinston et al., 2006) for the Cambridge 2006 UK Joint Social Work Education Conference introduced some of these ideas. Opinions expressed are the author's own and do not represent organisational strategies.

Definition of social work

An agreed definition of 'social work' – specifying the skills and knowledge that should inform contemporary practice – might help social workers establish their identities in multi-professional teams (now the preferred model for delivering services). The international definition of social work (agreed at the July 2000 Annual Meeting in Montreal of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and later adopted by the European Association of Schools of Social Work) typifies social work's 'new look'. Despite the Quality Assurance Agency Social Work Benchmark Group arguing in 2000 that 'the precise nature and scope of [social work] is itself a matter for legitimate study and critical debate' (QAA, 2000: 2.2), in 2002 the Topss UK Partnership adopted the international definition of social work as the Key Purpose of Social Work within the Social Work National Occupational Standards. This contemporary international definition has achieved wide acceptance in the United Kingdom:

> Social work is a profession that promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (Topss UK Partnership, 2002)

The definition suggests that social workers may practise a range of theoretical approaches with different people in different contexts, adopting social work roles characterised by partnerships with people who use services, carers and other professionals, assessing individual need within social contexts, and empowering and emancipating rather than institutionalising individuals. By implication, the definition suggests that experienced social workers must move beyond 'competence' towards capability and expertise that require partnerships and power-sharing.

What kinds of knowledge, skills and values support this definition?

Lymbery (2001) argues that to achieve the aims of social work, the profession draws on knowledge of structural oppression, power, service user rights, and inclusion; codes of ethics and practice that promote service users' citizenship, rights, and responsibilities; and practice expertise that embraces strategies for social inclusion and inter-agency, multi-professional structures. A scrutiny of the country-specific PQ frameworks' regulatory standards suggests that the frameworks provide opportunities for building these areas of knowledge, skills, values, and practice expertise.

Social work reviews' impact on roles

Reviews of social workers' roles and tasks in Scotland and England argue that social workers should carry out particular roles, whilst other roles might be shared with other professionals. Governmental reviews of social work roles have affirmed the importance of social work, but identify changed emphases for practice.

- In Scotland, the Twenty-first Century Review of Social Work (Scottish Executive, 2006c; see also Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse, 2005) recommended changed social work roles (to include social control, assisting with 'navigation across boundaries', and safeguarding well-being) within a proposed four-tier approach to practice. The Scottish Executive Report *Changing Lives* (2006c) led to training for performance improvement, service redesign, practice governance, leadership and workforce development.
- In Wales, the Garthwaite Report (2005) considered workforce issues and recommended relaunching social work as a profession, improving pay and career structures, and improving supervision policies. Garthwaite was followed by *Fulfilled Lives: Supportive Communities,* the Welsh Assembly Government's ten-year strategy for social services (WAG, 2007).
- Northern Ireland conducted a review of public administration that resulted in changed organisational structures, with the PSS Development and Training Strategy 2006–2016 a key document for PQ. A social work review will take place in 2008.
- In England, the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Skills published *Options for Excellence* in October 2006, which led to a GSCC review (2007c) of social workers' roles and tasks. Options for Excellence considered 'social care' (including social work) as a single entity rather than within wider contexts of health care, education, young people, and supported social housing – therefore its recommendations were less likely to resolve service fragmentation (Preston-Shoot, 2006). The subsequent literature review (Beresford, 2007; Blewett et al., 2007) on social workers' roles and tasks emphasised social work's ability, at its best, to work with ambiguous, complex, and uncertain situations, with Beresford (2007) offering an analysis of social work from users' perspectives.

From a UK-wide framework to country-specific PQ frameworks

A consideration of strengths and weaknesses of the predecessor UK-wide PQ framework helps to explain why different PQ frameworks were considered necessary. The previous framework, established in 1991 and regulated by the General Social Care Council (GSCC), offered two award levels, each built around six requirements. Regional Post Qualifying Consortia managed the framework by accrediting programmes of learning for 'professional credits'. Although PQ Consortia were successful in setting up collaborative partnerships between universities and employers and establishing PQ education and training's importance, attention was diverted from the key task of strategic workforce planning by having to function like a mini-university – accrediting programmes, assessing portfolios, and organising assessment boards (GSCC website, 2006b). 'Professional credit' lacked credibility outside the world of social work and never gained wide acceptance, in contrast to nursing, whose professional development framework led to relevant academic awards.

Over time, numbers of enrolled PQ candidates decreased (GSCC 2006a: 40). The most successful PQ programme was PQ1 (consolidation of qualifying level competences) – a single requirement usually delivered as a separately certificated module within an award (GSCC website, 2006b). Most social workers did not progress beyond PQ1 to complete a full award. The success of PQ Consortia was more evident in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where a singleton Consortium in each

country was able to exert influence and arguably establish more consistent practice standards. In England, standardisation was more difficult to achieve (Higham, 2001) because the 17 regionally based Consortia worked independently of each other. Phasing out 'professional credit' (except in Northern Ireland) and replacing it with academic credits and quality assurance in the new frameworks addresses one of the 1991 framework's flaws. However, separate frameworks will create future difficulties for social workers wishing to transfer PQ achievements across the four UK country-specific frameworks.

Overview of the country-specific PQ frameworks

PQ Consortia announced their closure dates and the UK-wide PQ social work awards began to be phased out from 2007, a process completed in 2009. England's new framework began in autumn 2007, and other countries' frameworks from 2008. Unlike the 1991 framework, the country-specific PQ frameworks are designed to promote strategic workforce planning and human resources strategies (new roles, recruitment, retention, and career progression) by developing the social work workforce.

PQ frameworks' choices of curricula are influenced by employers' human resources strategies, which seek to sustain the workforce's motivation and commitment and develop new roles and skills. Each framework potentially will provide social workers with opportunities to develop appropriate knowledge, skills and confidence for practice within multi-professional teams that are characteristic of contemporary organisational structures, and for acquiring new roles that assist career progression. Almost as soon as they were introduced, it became evident that the four country-specific PQ frameworks (GSCC, 2007a) might have to be revised because of governmental reviews of social work.

England

The General Social Care Council, which regulates English social work education, designed a PQ framework with awards at three levels: Post Qualifying Award in Specialist Social Work, Post Qualifying Award in Higher Specialist Social Work, and Post Qualifying Award in Advanced Social Work. Five specialisms are offered, most at each award level: mental health; adult social services; practice education; leadership and management; and children and young people, their families and carers. Skills for Care England, in collaboration with the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC, 2007), assumed responsibility for organising employers' planning networks to commission awards from GSCC-accredited provider universities (GSCC, 2005a). Standards and content for awards are based, *inter alia*, on GSCC requirements (including Codes of Practice), National Occupational Standards, and Skills for Care/GSCC guidance on assessment of practice in the workplace (GSCC, 2002b).

Wales

Unlike England's award-based system, the Wales Modular Framework for Post Qualifying Learning and Development in Social Work (CCW, 2005) is based on credit-rated academic modules rather than on awards (although awards will be developed). The Care Council for Wales approved a revised

PQ framework in March 2005, whose purpose (CCW, 2005; PQ Consortium for Wales, 2005) is to provide flexible life-long learning in continuing professional development as well as increase social workers' expertise, address their learning needs in a range of settings, link the learning of workers in related professions and other social care workers, and allow social care organisations to develop as learning organisations.

The Care Council for Wales collaborates with employers to develop an all-Wales CPD portfolio, which enables employers to link attainment of particular modules to specified posts or career progression. The framework encourages learners to accumulate modules to achieve a higher education award. Awards and credits for the awards are cumulative, with social workers being able to progress through different levels. Three priorities for awards cover induction of new social workers, mental health, and children (childcare) (CCW, 2006).

Like the social work degree in Wales, the framework requires learning and assessment to recognise the Welsh context of the awards; reflect and promote research-minded and evidence-based practice, anti-discriminatory practice and the Code of Practice for social workers; and be relevant to social work practice. Employers in Wales can be commended for extending the principle of cultural identity by developing successfully the PQ skills and qualifications of social workers employed in Wales who originate from countries outside the United Kingdom (Higham, 2005).

Scotland

Scotland (SSSC, 2004) seeks to develop the entire social service workforce, including social workers, within a systematic CPD framework. The Scottish Social Services Council report recognised employers' need to 'support their staff to enable them to develop and maintain their competence' (SSSC, 2004: 3). Scotland acknowledged the value of extending the PQ Consortium's positive achievements to the whole of the workforce. Learning networks and centres of excellence help to promote continuing professional development. The report intended that specialist awards would assist career development and take into account employers' expectations and policy priorities (SSSC, 2004: 6), including development of integrated services (2004: 15).

The PQ Consortium in Scotland expressed concern that its demise and planned replacement by employers' and training providers' regional learning networks would mean a lack of consistency and resulting fragmentation of PQ provision (Community Care, 2006). The SSSC (2005) published rules and requirements for specialist training of social service workers in Scotland, including social workers. (Training for social services workers may well share topics and concerns with programmes specifically designed for social workers, but roles and responsibilities differ across the workforce, and the programmes' approaches will reflect this differentiation.)

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Social Service Council (NISSC) announced that it would establish rules and requirements, maintain standards, and manage the funding for a new PQ social work framework (NISCC, 2005a). The already established Northern Ireland PQ Partnership (the PQ Consortium) continues to play a central role, and is responsible for developing the successor framework, its accreditation, and assessment (NIPQETP, 2005). Northern Ireland's revised PQ framework aims for more

flexibility, accessible seamless learning opportunities that respond to occupational needs across all sectors, alignment to career structures and opportunities, comprehensive provision (including relevant developments and in-service training) and academic and professional pathways. Three types of award are: Specific award (60 credits); Specialist award (180 credits); and Leadership and Strategic Work award (180 credits). Not all programmes will carry academic credits although their level is at postgraduate.

From 2003, unlike other countries of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland graduates of the social work degree began the first part of their PQ training during their first assessed year in employment (AYE). Also unlike other UK countries, Northern Ireland proposed that its PQ awards should be postgraduate, designed explicitly (but not exclusively) for social work graduates.

Comparison across countries

Although PQ frameworks are country-specific, they share some aims:

- To develop practitioners beyond beginning levels of competence in specialist areas of practice;
- To promote inter-professional learning and multi-professional practice;
- To develop leadership and management skills.

The frameworks display similarities in their structures and requirements. Most importantly, as discussed above, the countries have reviewed social work, thus influencing the kinds of learning prescribed for PQ. All four countries have introduced regulated frameworks governed by statutory rules and legislation with clear written regulations. Each country has specified its framework standards – the expected outcomes that determine the content and shape of learning and assessment for modules and awards. In each country, PQ standards draw on National Occupational Standards, as well as Codes of Practice and specialist practice standards. All four countries require providers of learning to offer opportunities for Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), so that social workers with credits from the previous UK-wide framework might be able to gain credit for these within the new frameworks. (Working out the details of APCL/APEL credit is left to university and employer partnerships.)

Each framework made arrangements for assessing practice, including a practice education qualification. All countries require universities to issue transcripts of learning to candidates, and to appoint external examiners with appropriate qualifications. In principle, there is provision for recognising and accepting internationally qualified social workers into each framework. Each country 'commissions' programmes of learning from established employer partnerships that engage with universities and other stakeholders. All countries involve people who use services as stakeholders to ensure that PQ learning is relevant.

To sum up, all four countries have set expectations of relevance and quality through specifying standards, regulating processes, and involving employers and the people who use services. Access to learning is encouraged through requirements for APCL/APEL, and there is some provision for internationally qualified social workers. The requirement for work-based learning and assessment in every country affirms its.

Majority trends

Majority trends are evident across three countries, with Northern Ireland taking different decisions that can be attributed in part to its social work qualification being offered entirely at undergraduate level.

- Three of the four countries (England, Scotland and Wales) do not plan as yet a direct link between the requirements for post registration training and learning (PRTL) and PQ. Northern Ireland proposes a link between PRTL and PQ by 2010, when established career structures linked to agreed training and qualifications and to continuing registration will be in place (NISCC, 2006).
- The Post Qualifying Consortia will close in England, Wales and Scotland, but the Northern Ireland Consortium will assume the role of managing the successor Northern Ireland PQ framework.
- Other social services/carer and professional groups can access the frameworks in England, Scotland and Wales by taking modules but are not eligible for social work professional awards. In Northern Ireland, social workers attending a multi-disciplinary programme are able to obtain an award.
- In England, Scotland and Wales, PQ frameworks stop at masters degree level, ignoring the rapid growth in the United Kingdom of part-time, practice-based Professional Doctorates (ESRC, 2005), although Northern Ireland recognises the potential appeal of a professional doctorate (Prof D) (see Chapter 15).

Different orientations towards CPD and PQ

Different orientations towards promoting CPD or PQ awards can be identified. The English framework is based on achievement of awards, whilst in contrast the Wales framework is essentially a CPD framework based on individual modules. It is not clear how individual CPD modules will fit within the proposed English PQ framework. Since CPD activity of 15 days over three years (PRTL – post registration training and learning) is the only requirement for social workers' re-registration, an emphasis on CPD might have been a wiser choice for England.

The English PQ framework represents an uneasy compromise of academic levels; the Wales PQ framework also fudges this issue. The GSCC is concerned that the many social workers who lack a degree should have opportunities to undertake PQ study at undergraduate level 6 (England and Wales level 6, Scotland level 10) and thus attain an honours degree. However, over time, as social work becomes a graduate profession, candidates' preferences will lead to all postgraduate awards.

The Scottish framework emphasises CPD rather than awards. Scotland chose to develop the entire social service workforce with CPD programmes and centres of excellence, e-learning, and a learning exchange (SIESWE, 2006a), providing a support infrastructure that is likely to improve CPD attainment. Scotland replaced the Practice Teaching Award with a four-stage modular framework based on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF, 2006). These practice-learning qualifications (SIESWE, 2005) contain very detailed requirements and guidelines, which leave little discretion to providers, thus apparently addressing the PQ Consortium's concerns. If all

PQ awards in Scotland are as prescriptive, they may not be flexible enough to meet individual CPD needs for personal development.

First year in practice

The four countries take different approaches to requirements for the newly qualified social workers' first year in practice: England introduced a requirement for a 'consolidation of qualifying level competences' module in its Specialist awards, but Scotland has not chosen to institute 'consolidation'. Although the other three countries at the time of writing are producing guidance on the first year in practice, Northern Ireland is the only UK country to require an assessed year in employment (AYE) following the degree.

Will the PQ frameworks be successful?

To improve their chances for success, the PQ frameworks must address potential impediments – complex organisational contexts, underdeveloped workforce planning, PQ's cost, and insufficient fitness for purpose.

Complex organisational contexts

The country-specific PQ frameworks can be criticised for being overly complex and over-regulated, thus lacking flexibility to respond to new practice challenges. Regulatory bodies' lengthy PQ requirements may overload the content of awards. University PQ providers operate differing credit frameworks, thus potentially hindering flexible access by future candidates. A diverse scattered workforce employed by many statutory, private and third-sector organisations is responsible for delivering social work, and this characteristic, together with organisational changes, creates additional complexities that potentially limit PQ access.

Underdeveloped workforce planning

A shortage of qualified social workers continues to impact on service delivery nationally, regionally, and locally (SfC, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2002b; CCW, 2003, 2007; NISSC, 2002). Employers compete for scarce social work staff, but do not always succeed in retaining social workers in their workforce. Social work employers are not yet accustomed to workforce planning or assuming a planning role for education and training – therefore they may fail to recognise the benefits of PQ for addressing recruitment and retention issues. Because of difficulties in covering day-to-day work, line managers may feel unable to release social workers for PQ activities, thus exacerbating some social workers' low morale (PQ Consortium for Wales, 2005; Aldridge, 2006; Rowland, 2003, 2006) (see Chapter 14).

Potential lack of portability across UK countries

An important issue is whether social workers undertaking PQ in one UK country will gain recognition in another. The country-specific frameworks do not mention portability, and differ in their

approach to awards and other aspects. Awards developed in separate UK countries may not be transferable, thus impeding staff mobility and social workers' wider career development. The frameworks' silence on this issue is worrying, particularly since they are likely to make some provision for internationally qualified social workers now working in the UK.

PQ's cost

Full awards are expensive to fund; stand-alone, academically credit-rated modules will be expensive because the universities cannot obtain Higher Education Funding Council subsidy for less than full awards. Part-time candidates balancing study with busy workloads will take a long time to complete an award. Unless employers collaborate on sponsorships for sufficient numbers, programmes may not run. Informal intelligence from employers indicates that relatively small numbers of social workers will be released for PQ, thus threatening programme viability and making it difficult to negotiate economies of scale and drive down tuition costs. Only inter-professional award frameworks may be able to attract sufficiently large numbers that could reduce costs, but although modules may be open to other professionals, each country has established a framework that is specific to social work (in Scotland, to social care), rather than an inter-professional one.

Insufficient 'fitness for purpose'

Because of PQ's ill-defined purpose, a continuing preoccupation with 'competence', insufficient differentiation between qualifying-level and PQ-level teaching, learning and the assessment, and the resulting neglect of the pedagogical features of PQ-level practice, the PQ frameworks' 'fitness for purpose' is open to debate.

No agreement on PQ's purpose

Lack of agreement on the overall purpose of PQ learning, or even on defining its purpose, triggers additional concern about PQ's fitness for purpose. Employers in the four UK countries define the purpose of social work PQ differently, some stating anecdotally that PQ's purpose is to 'make social workers competent – a kind of remedial programme following qualification', whilst other employers suggest that PQ should develop more complex specialist skills and equip social workers for advanced senior roles.

Doel, Flynn and Nelson (2006) identified the main purpose of PQ as professional development: enhancing and updating existing skills and knowledge, opportunities for reflective and analytical thinking, with commitment to broad CPD rather than training. These findings replicate those of Rowland (2003, 2006), based on data from 130 PQ candidates.

In 2006, Skills for Care East Midlands (2006) convened a group of practitioners to debate and agree a PQ definition, prompted by a lack of precision in different interpretations of its purpose. Their statement echoed Doel et al.'s and Rowland's findings, but expanded into new territory by emphasising the personalisation of practice, contributing to the learning of others, multi-professionalism, and linking PQ attainment to new roles, responsibilities and self-esteem. This statement, subsequently endorsed by regional employers, represents the views of a small group of practitioners in one region of England. PQ frameworks across the UK would benefit from embarking on similar

attempts to define the PQ's purpose, and then comparing the results. It is likely that similar threads, as well as different understandings, would run through different statements of purpose.

Preoccupation with competence

A potentially damaging aspect of the PQ frameworks is an apparent preoccupation with evidencing 'competence', an attribute linked to practice at the point of qualification, rather than thinking about how practice can be developed beyond competence. When Torkington (personal communication, 2007) led work-based learning and assessment workshops in the East Midlands, she discovered that employers wanted to retain direct observation to provide evidence of competence. They exhibited a tension between feeling that many newly qualified social workers are not yet competent and wanting social workers to become autonomous practitioners. The preoccupation with a narrow concept of 'competence' does not allow development of practice expertise, and arguably might limit social workers' career development opportunities.

Regulatory bodies in three UK countries disappointingly continue to focus on 'competence' rather than on seeking to develop social workers as expert 'consultants' in line with skills escalator (NHSMA 2004a) principles (see Chapter 15). In England, the GSCC's revised PQ framework 'aims to be: focused on the assessment of competence in practice' (GSCC, 2005a: 4, 2). The GSCC considers that the purpose of PQ's specialist level is to enable practitioners to consolidate, extend and deepen initial professional competence in specialised contexts (GSCC 2005a: 19) but does not clarify how this deeper level differs from 'competence' at qualifying level.

One of Scotland's revised PQ teaching, learning and assessment requirements (SSSC, 2005: 30, P) is to 'make sure that … there is direct and verifiable evidence of practice competence'.

Northern Ireland identifies the aims of its proposed new PQ framework (NIPQETP, 2005: 4, 14c) as 'offering a broad range of opportunities for … developing breadth of competence'.

PQ/CPD and competence: the view from Wales

Wales has adopted a different interpretation of practice to be developed by PQ. Instead of 'deeper competence', Wales' key principles of its revised PQ framework (CCW, 2006: Appendix 1) are to develop 'a model which promotes enhanced practice' and 'a shift in assessment from behavioural competences to enhanced skills and knowledge'. Its PQ framework therefore might align more easily with a career ladder that promotes practice expertise.

Beyond competence

Is competence a suitable concept for defining PQ study? The Department of Health (2002: 16) explained 'competence' for the qualifying degree level as a product of knowledge, skills and

values. Eraut (1994: 159) comments thoughtfully that 'competence', initially a rationale for justifying professional examinations or assessments, has became a tool of governmental regulatory control over the professions. Viewing a competent practitioner as 'tolerably good but less than expert' (1994: 160) places competence at the level of newly qualified practitioners when professional learning is just beginning. Eraut (2006) explains 'competence' as an ability to undertake required roles and tasks to an expected standard, but argues that deciding the scope of professional competence is open to debate. Competence, therefore, is not a fixed entity but a shifting concept, and this effectively demolishes the binary view of social workers being either 'competent' or 'not competent'.

Eraut prefers to use the term 'capability', explained as 'everything that a person can think or do' (2006: 5; 1994: 208–10). This recognises that practitioners have reserves of capability beyond the limits of narrowly defined competence. The Higher Education for Capability (HEC) Submission to the Dearing Review of Higher Education presented a rationale for capability in its manifesto (HEC, 1994), explaining it as a broader, richer notion than 'competence' – concerned with growth and potential as well as with a current performance. 'Capability' integrates knowledge, skills, understanding and personal qualities, intertwined with a capacity for autonomous learning (Stephenson, 1994). Thus, capability addresses knowledge, skills, values and esteem.

Benner (1984), who adapted the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) model of skills acquisition for nurses, placed 'competence' on a staged ladder that begins with a 'novice' practitioner, progresses to 'advanced beginner', 'competence', 'proficiency', and then reaches 'expertise'. The Benner stage of 'competence' is reached at the end of the social work degree, but 'proficiency' and 'expertise' develop over time through practice, supervision, and formal PQ study.

Model of skills acquisition (adapted from Benner, 1984)

Novice

Novices cannot use discretionary judgement. They stick to taught rules or plans, with little perception of how individual situations may differ.

Advanced beginner

Advanced beginners' perceptions of situations are limited, treating attributes and aspects separately and with equal importance. Decision-making is less laboured. Analytical approaches are used only in new situations or when problems occur.

Competent

Competent practitioners no longer rely entirely on rules and guidelines, but can use maxims for guidance, according to the meaning of difference situations, undertake deliberate planning, and perceive deviations from 'normal' patterns.

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Proficient

Proficient practitioners use guidelines based on attributes or aspects and, after prior experience, recognise the global characteristics of situations. They begin to see their actions in relation to longer-term goals, to recognise what is most important in a situation, and to cope with the crowdedness of pressurised contexts where many separate factors vie for attention.

Expert

Expert practitioners grasp situations intuitively based on deep tacit understanding, see situations holistically rather than in terms of aspects, and envision what is possible.

The Dreyfus/Benner model portrays stages of proficiency and expertise as a growing ability to inter-nalise rules, demonstrate intuitive understanding, and think through situations more rapidly. Eraut (2006) criticises the Dreyfus/Benner model for being too individualistic and therefore inappropriate for practitioners who typically work in multi-professional teams where ethical concerns require a sharing of knowledge with other team members. Instead, he advocates 'situated' practice that acknowledges social, economic, political, and psychological contexts, and the conditions and situa-tions in which practitioners function. Although supporting the Dreyfus/Benner stage of 'proficiency' as a logical progression from 'competence', Eraut (2006: 8) considers that progressing to 'expertise' requires different kinds of learning to attain deliberative skills of critical analysis, develop different interpretations of complex situations, and practise effectively with other professionals and service users. These capabilities differ from the intuitive, rapid, internalised actions that Dreyfus/Benner propose.

Reflective practice and critical analysis

Eraut, Dreyfus, and Benner made significant contributions to social workers' understanding of how professionals learn and develop their practice. Schön's model of reflective practice (1983, 1987, 1991b) is particularly important. Schön theorised two kinds of reflection: 'reflection-in-action', requiring practitioners to think on their feet and test ideas within practice situations, and 'reflection-on-action' (1983: ix), considering actions of the past. Over time, as part of their practice repertoire, practitioners build thoughts and memories of remembered actions and relative formative events.

   Reflective practice must not be regarded as a magic formula for improving practice, but it can help PQ practitioners become more aware of significant aspects of practice situations, decisions, and actions. However, growing awareness is not sufficient – critical analysis is a necessary next step towards developing practice capability. Eraut (1994) and Usher, Briant and Johnson (1997) expressed some dislike of Schön's portrayal of reflective practice, doubting whether reflection-in-action can take place in rapidly occurring practice situations. Eraut's most cogent criticism of Schön's

concept of 'reflection' is that it is a process not situated within a context, and therefore, without critical analysis, it could result in seemingly instinctive but unethical decisions.

Kolb's model of experiential learning (Kolb and Fry, 1975; see Chapters 2 and 11) is indebted to Dewey's process of logical thinking for effective enquiry (1933, 1938, 1997). The Kolb model comprises a cycle that moves from concrete experience to observation and reflection on the experience, then to forming abstract concepts following reflection, and finally, to testing the concepts in new situations. Kolb encourages practitioners to use reflection for finding new meanings in their practice. Practitioners should avoid perceiving 'concrete experience' as something that 'just happens'. The hallmark of a PQ-level practitioner is to regard 'concrete experience' as emerging from planned interventions that the practitioner subjects to critical analysis (Furlong, 2003) after the events take place. Kolb's process, used in this way, can help practitioners develop capability in practice (Torkington, personal communication, 2007).

Two aspects for PQ to address are the nature of knowledge and its relationship to critical practice, and the use of reflexive approaches that encourage development of critical reflective practice. A review (SCIE, 2003b) of the sources and purpose of knowledge in social care/social work identified five non-hierarchical sources of knowledge: the policy community, organisations, researchers, users and carers, and practitioners. The notion that practitioners can be sources of knowledge, creating frameworks for understanding from their practice experiences and theorising from practice, may be difficult for practitioners to accept doing. But PQ provides opportunities for practitioners to expand their knowledge base from external sources and also, through appropriate learning and teaching strategies, to recognise and present for analysis their own emerging practice frameworks. This is more than so-called 'practice wisdom' – practitioner knowledge is one side of a prism that contains (in equal value rather than as a hierarchy) practitioner knowledge, academic and research knowledge and service user knowledge. For example, PQ can become a vehicle for promoting integration of knowledge sources through critical and reflexive approaches. PQ at its best could stimulate practitioner research (Best, 2007).

Learning organisations

Kolb, Schön, Dreyfus and Dreyfus, Benner and Eraut are interested in how professionals learn from, and within, their practice. Their pedagogical theories extend the concept of practice to levels beyond competence. But individual practice takes place in organisational contexts – as Eraut (2006) argues, practice is 'situated'. Without supportive environments within organisations, formal PQ study and individual reflection may not be enough to help practitioners develop beyond competence.

Schön was interested in organisational learning, in collaboration with Argyris (Argyris and Schön, 1978, 1996). One of Schön's 'givens' is that rapid societal change compels organisations to respond and adapt. He supported the goal of a 'learning society' that promotes continuous organisational learning (Etzioni, 1968) for helping organisations to deal with change (Schön, 1973: 57). This links to the concept of the 'learning organisation' (Senge, 1990: Senge et al., 1994; see Chapter 14), characterised by networks, experimentation, and devolved structures. A learning organisation is a necessary corollary of PQ frameworks that should enable individual practice to develop and thrive despite organisational turbulence.

Discussion

These theories suggest approaches for teaching, learning, and assessing PQ. Instead of relying on didactic instruction, PQ must win practitioners' trust by encouraging them to share their knowledge and experiences in blame-free environments. Teaching and learning strategies for PQ can enable practitioners to learn from their own practice experiences. Parton and O'Byrne's (2000) constructive social work is useful for PQ because it promotes different discourses and uses narrative processes that make evident the inner resources of individuals. Telling the story of a practice experience in an action learning set can open up different possibilities for future practice. The constructive social work model listens, acknowledges the likelihood of uncertainty, and promotes the art of social work (England, 1986), echoing Keith-Lucas's (1972) classic account of the 'art and science' of helping. Fook and her colleagues (Fook, 2002; Fook et al., 2000; Napier and Fook, 2000) have studied how practitioners theorise and create knowledge, viewing critical reflection as a way of 'self-researching' experience.

It follows that assessment of PQ practice must differ from that at qualifying level. Instead of relying on snapshot observations of unrelated episodes of practice, PQ assessment ideally should create a picture of how practitioners develops their capability, over time, towards proficiency and expertise. Holistic assessments that make use of critical reflective analyses in practice-based projects, backed by the verification statements of line managers, colleagues and service users as well as carefully chosen linked observations, may come closer to capturing the desired levels of PQ development than replicating assessment methods of the qualifying degree.

Appropriate PQ teaching, learning and assessment, supported by a learning organisation environment for practice, will enable practitioners to develop higher-level skills. The key question to be addressed by the book as a whole is: 'how will a social worker in possession of a post qualifying award – at any level – be expected to be different from a social worker without?' An analogy could be drawn with higher education's level descriptors at bachelor's and master's degree levels (QAA, 2001; SCQF, 2007). The higher the academic level, the greater the expectation of autonomous learning and original thinking. Therefore, PQ practice should demonstrate autonomy, original thinking, creativity, responsibility, problem-solving in unfamiliar contexts, critical understanding of practice issues, and an appropriate exercise of professional judgement.

Disappointingly, Blewett, Lewis and Tunstill's literature review (2007) on social work roles and tasks in England and the GSCC Report (2008) on social workers roles and tasks did not distinguish between the initial stage of qualification and more experienced levels of experience. The Scotland Twenty-first Centuru review (2006c) suggested four tiers of practice. More attention is being paid to the status of the 'newly qualified social worker'. Although (as previously noted) Northern Ireland is the only UK country with an assessed year in practice following completion of the degree, the other UK countries are placing more importance on induction and the first year in practice, suggesting that this may be a first step to differentiating different levels of practice, and ultimately establishing clearer outcomes for PQ.

Conclusion: flagships or sinking ships?

The PQ frameworks are ambitious. Despite their flaws, they merit support because their success will help social work to establish itself fully as a profession whose social workers are skilled at working in

partnership with people who use services and carers – experts by experience (CSCI, 2007) – to create better outcomes. Employers, universities, practitioners, service users and carers can avert the 'sinking ships' scenario for PQ by addressing the issues appropriately, thus helping the country-specific PQ frameworks to become flagships for the social work profession.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you consider the PQ frameworks fit for purpose? What is missing?

2. Is 'capability' a more suitable concept for assessing PQ than 'competence'?

3. How will critical reflection help social workers develop their practice?

Further reading

Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*. London: Routledge.

This is a classic approach for understanding how to develop knowledge within a competence framework.

Fook, J., Ryan, M. and Hawkins, L. (2000) *Professional Expertise: Practice, Theory and Education for Working in Uncertainty*. London: Whiting & Birch.

The authors studied professional practitioners who developed over five years from beginning practice to effectiveness, and propose a theory of professional practice expertise in conditions of uncertainty, together with educational strategies that promote this expertise.

Taylor, C. and White, S. (2000) *Practicing Reflexivity in Health and Welfare*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

This book counters the evidence-based practice approaches that have become so dominant in discourses about the relationship of knowledge to practice. It promotes reflexivity as a technique for analysing practice, narrative approaches and argues that practitioners not only apply knowledge but also *create* new knowledge from their practice experiences.