

Educating Practitioners for Reflective Inquiry: The Contribution of a Portfolio Process to New Ways of Knowing

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Context

In 2004, the Department of Applied Social Studies at University College Cork (UCC) inaugurated a new Masters of Social Science (MSocSc) by portfolio. This new programme, which exists side by side with the Master of Social Science (MSocSc) by thesis, gives experienced social work practitioners the opportunity to investigate through research real problems of their practice arising within the context of their employing agencies. Included within the new Masters programme is the requirement to complete a reflective portfolio to document the research process, which casts reflective inquiry as a mandate of professional development. This chapter uses research data collected in interviews with programme participants to report on results of the new Masters by portfolio programme, in particular, on participants' discoveries of new knowledge and ways of knowing and their awareness and understandings of these discoveries.

Objectives of the New Masters of Social Science by Portfolio

In spite of Ernest Boyer's compelling call for a new scholarship of application that addresses the real, complex problems of individuals and their institutions—that asks, 'How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems?' (Boyer 1990, p. 21)—most academic researchers have not systematically examined how and with what skills practitioners go about inquiring into the puzzles, dilemmas or contradictions they encounter in their everyday work lives. The most extensive research to date is probably research on self-study in teaching and teacher education (Loughran et al. 2004). Some research that does exist emphasises the gap between practitioners' espoused theories of action and their actual attempts to solve these problems of practice (Argyris 1990; Argyris & Schön 1974; Schön 1983, 1995). Thus in 2004 when UCC's Department of Applied Social Studies offered a new Masters in Social Science (by portfolio) programme for practitioner social workers, it simultaneously offered practitioners a mandate to document how they went about the inquiry process through a reflective portfolio process. In the new programme, participants would conduct research on a problem of their practice while they simultaneously engaged in a thoughtful, reflective interrogation and documentation of every step of the process.

Inquiry is a challenging undertaking for students and their teachers, often the subject of serious misconceptions (Kuhn 2005) and a process that needs to be scaffolded for all its practitioners. Common usage defines inquiry as an

investigation—that is, to probe, explore, research, question, query and so on (Oxford American Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus 2001, p. 427). But these definitions fail to hint at the skills involved. Here, following psychologist Deanna Kuhn (2005, p. 4), inquiry is defined initially as *thinking well* in undertaking the investigation of a problem arising in a real-life setting. Reflective inquiry in a portfolio process highlights the inquiry task as a meta-cognitive issue—that is, the thinking about one's own processes of thinking and knowing, which is needed to document the investigative process as well as the meaning and understandings one achieves through it.

This chapter reports on the results of the first test of the new two-year programme, the Masters in Social Science (by portfolio), from the perspective of the first class of social workers (n=4) in the programme and from the perspective of the course designers (the authors of this chapter). The chapter addresses two issues:

- the course designers' views of how reflective portfolio development contributes to the inquiry process, especially in real-life settings
- practitioners' perspectives on the inquiry skills they needed to undertake the programme, the skills they actually used and what they learned from the process.

This chapter first outlines the structure of the programme and its reflective portfolio, then discusses the skills needed for inquiry and the challenges involved in developing those skills, and finally reports on the responses of both participants and teachers to the new programme, highlighting how the programme explicitly interacted with and refined practitioners' way of knowing.

Programme Structure and Portfolio Construction

Run over two academic years, the new Masters of Social Science (MSocSc) by portfolio programme is structured around the development of:

- research projects situated within participants' employing agencies—participants identify areas of research interest and formulate a two-year research plan
- reflective portfolios—portfolios focus both on participants' research projects and on the development of participants' ways of knowing and inquiry-based skills.

In other words, the portfolio both supports and requires a reflective approach to the inquiry conducted through the research project.

The programme incorporates reflective inquiry through a peer inquiry group process. The participants meet in a group on a regular monthly basis for the first year of the programme and on a fortnightly basis for the second year. These two-hour group discussions include all the participants and the course director. The group is a loosely structured learning environment designed to meet the particular needs and concerns of participants at any given time, to provide them with the opportunity to present particular issues arising from their research, to invite

discussion and comment from others and, in the process, to clarify and point to ways forward in their research agendas. In this environment, participants are helped to refine their research questions and to select an appropriate research methodology, a central element of the portfolio construction process. The programme also includes lectures; individual tutorials; classes on research, journal writing and journal reading; and individual presentations of participants' progress.

For assessment, participants submit several pieces of work throughout the two years of the programme, and these pieces, listed below, comprise the final research portfolio:

- learning journal, consisting of entries on developing reflective approaches to researching social work (3000 words)
- review of literature (3000–5000 words)
- research proposal (5000 words)
- research design and final report (20 000 words)
- overall reflection and implications for the future (the finished portfolio should include an overall reflection on what the participant has learned from engaging in the portfolio research process and any suggestions arising for future research—approximately 500 words).

As a learning and assessment activity, the learning journal is intended to encourage participants to formulate, track and document their thoughts, ideas and actions throughout the programme. Participants are required to write in their learning journal at regular intervals throughout the programme. In the peer group discussions (outlined above), participants are encouraged to select entries from their learning journals and to read them aloud to the other group participants and to seek comments and suggestions. Writing the learning journal helps participants to write freely and develop a sense of competence in their writing ability. Reading journal entries in the group helps to promote participants' confidence in engaging in discussions with others about their emerging thoughts and ideas.

In joining a reflective portfolio process to a standard research inquiry process in this programme, we have added a new dimension to research inquiry—that is, a deliberate reflection on the process. We want to ensure that all aspects of the research process engaged participants in a reflective dialogue as well as providing them with a means of documenting the process of inquiry and learning. Each step of the research process—developing a research question, undertaking a literature review, developing an appropriate research design, gaining access to study participants, carrying out the research, writing it up—is subject to reflective interrogation and dialogue with colleagues and instructors through the portfolio process over the course of the programme. The portfolio aspect of the programme is deemed of special significance because it uniquely allows for the documentation of both the research and reflective processes of the programme. Participants, who are also practicing social workers, are being introduced to research for the first time and doing so within their own institutions, situations often fraught with dilemmas. The reflective portfolio process provides a place to document the experience and to ponder what it means to the research and the researcher and what new understandings it helps them to achieve.

Given both the participants' lack of familiarity with reflective inquiry, and lack of understanding of the inquiry process more generally (discussed below), we feel the inquiry process needs to be taught, mentored, modelled and supported in collaboration with others. Therefore, in this new course, we scaffold the process in several ways. We:

- review the definitions of reflective inquiry by John Dewey (1933), Donald Schön (1983) and ourselves, all of which emphasise the serious, systematic work of inquiry that is built on the requirement for evidence and deliberation
- introduce and mentor students through the process of creating portfolio entries with their evidence, the building blocks of the portfolio
- monitor students' reflective writing
- invite them to share in presenting and critiquing their portfolio entries over the course of the programme and, at its conclusion, articulating what they have found and learned from the process.

Challenges: Defining and Undertaking Reflective Inquiry

Recent research on reflective inquiry undertaken as part of a portfolio process has identified two significant problems: there is little agreement about what reflective inquiry is; and, without an agreed definition, there is little comparable research that can document or verify the purported, but highly regarded, benefits of reflective inquiry (Rodgers 2002; Zeichner 1999). Lacking description, the tasks of an inquiry process remain hidden from view and understanding that might guide new inquirers.

Defining Reflective Inquiry

As developers of the new course, we share in defining the portfolio process and teaching social work students about it. We begin with an introductory definition of reflective inquiry. To us:

Reflection is an intentional act engaging a person alone, but especially in collaboration with others—students, teachers, practitioners, other researchers or colleagues—in *systematic inquiry*, interrogating a situation of teaching or learning, usually one presenting some puzzle, to construct an understanding of some aspect of it. Such an act looks both backwards and to the future. It is in service of understanding and meaning that will shape action. It involves gathering and documenting evidence of the inquiry. It likely involves narrative for it is the story of meaning and it can raise ethical issues for the people involved (Lyons 2002, p. 99, emphasis added).

This definition incorporates the idea of an intentional investigation of some real-life puzzle or problem, which has as its goal meaning and understanding gained through serious investigation, the assessment of evidence and collaborative reflection.

Kuhn (2005), bringing insights from developmental psychology, her own innovative empirical research with children and adolescents and her review of adult

development in inquiry, suggests the complexity of inquiry for students of all ages:

Students must have not only the skills and the opportunity to engage in increasingly complex forms of inquiry ... it is equally essential that they develop a firm belief that engaging in inquiry is worthwhile. Such a belief can be grounded only in their own experience. But inquiry experiences have the advantage of revealing their value and power as they are engaged. No further argument for their worth is necessary. Nonetheless, understanding of the nature and value of inquiry itself develops, as do the skills that inquiry requires ... patterns in the development of this epistemological understanding of the nature of knowing have been identified by developmental psychologists, and their findings stand to inform the stated intentions of educators to include understanding of inquiry as a curriculum standard (Kuhn 2005, p. 59).

The Foundational Inquiry Issue: Students' Perspectives towards Knowing

With other researchers, Kuhn (2005) argues that a perspective towards knowing is the foundational beginning of inquiry—that is, awareness of oneself as a knower and of the process of knowing. Unfortunately, this is a seldom acknowledged starting place. Yet, as William Perry first demonstrated in his ground-breaking work *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (1970), most students are likely to begin their educational careers with a naive, dualistic perspective on knowledge, knowing, truth and so on. That is, they expect that knowledge is known and that someone—usually an authority figure—knows the one right answer. Perry found that as students develop, they come to realise that there are or can be multiple perspectives on what is known. The danger of this perspective of multiplicity is that any opinion may then be seen as as good as any other and all knowledge and truth can be relegated to 'just an opinion'. But growth beyond is possible and there comes the realisation that some positions have a better grounding in evidence. Then can come the revolutionary leap to the realisation that all knowledge is constructed—unfortunately, not all adults or students reach this point. Perry outlined these perspectives as five epistemological positions (see Kuhn 2005 and Hofer & Pintrich 2002 for similarities in models of epistemological development).

But the journey to developing richer and more complex perspectives on knowing and knowledge—that is, to developing an epistemological perspective—takes rich nurturing, according to Kuhn (2005). *Inquiry is in the service of changing understandings. Learning involves changing understandings.* Yet epistemological assumptions can have serious implications for how a learner will approach the tasks of learning and of seeing new perspectives on a subject. Teachers encounter these assumptions all the time—for example, the university student who told her lecturer, a medical doctor, that she did not want to participate in a small group discussion with other students because 'it would be a waste of time. I only want to hear from the lecturer who knows'. Or the high school philosophy teacher who hesitated to give his students his opinion in a debate about a case of euthanasia: 'Do I give my opinion ... running the risk that twenty-two kids will change their vote because this is what the teacher thinks?' This teacher also found that his students thought the only way to

convince someone was to keep saying their opinion louder and louder, ‘rather than searching for some evidence’ (Lyons 1990, pp. 166–167). One junior high school student, addressing his small group, directed students to their group investigative task:

‘You choose what to look at and I’ll say what we found’, seeing no connection between the two tasks (Kuhn 2005, p. 100).

Developing Skill in Inquiry

One path out of these dilemmas is knowing how to connect, read and evaluate evidence, an ability critical to developing understanding of the inquiry process. But to develop this ability, students must first be able to sustain observation; connect both observation and evidence to the central question of their investigation; and then write up what they have discovered, not just what they have done. In fact, data and conclusions are sometimes not linked, and students rarely connect what they discovered to their own knowledge (Kuhn 2005, p. 54). Some researchers in this area have argued for the necessity of moving towards more highly structured sequences of activities in support of the inquiry process, identifying and breaking down each step of the process, such as those listed here.

In the new MSocSc by portfolio programme, students acknowledged that they found many aspects of the research inquiry process to be new experiences—for example, defining and revising their research question, and reviewing relevant research and placing their project within that context of prior research. Some of these new experiences tested and others enhanced their own ways of knowing. While students attended classes in research design and execution, they were highly aware of how their projects, all rooted in the agencies in which they worked, created subtle differences in how they were viewed and how they viewed their projects. Participants were seen by colleagues and service users as researchers within their own agencies. They also began to make more direct connections between research and practice. As one participant commented:

When doing the research I began to realise that the knowledge I had acquired over the years in practice was very important and relevant to the research (Halton & Lyons 2006).

Questions about knowing became central for all and, in the end, a theme of the programme.

Outcomes: Practitioners’ Views on Inquiry through Research and Reflection

Through this research, the authors wished to investigate participants’ views of:

- knowledge
- the nature of that knowledge
- the process of their coming to know and understand through their participation in the programme.

Through focus group discussion, individual questionnaires and interviews, important information surfaced that the authors hope will help to inform and shape educational developments and learning practices on dedicated programmes for experienced professionals. This research documents the responses of participants to significant programme features that supported their learning throughout the two years, highlighting the following themes (described in more detail below) as outcomes of the reflective inquiry process:

- greater understanding of knowledge, knowing and coming to know
- improved links between research and practice
- new knowledge of practice
- appreciation of learning scaffolds
- development of a culture of reflective inquiry.

The contribution that the portfolio process and the course design made to supporting and extending their learning is highlighted in the participants' own words (all quotes below are taken from Halton & Lyons 2006). The successful completion of the programme by all students lends weight and credibility to the views expressed.

Greater Understanding of Knowledge, Knowing and Coming to Know

Participants varied in their approaches to the research projects. For example, one participant immediately felt a sense of the challenge, of not knowing even about practical things such as using the library. This person felt unsure and incompetent, but gradually 'felt challenged about my narrow interpretation of events' in the workplace and 'began to realise there were any number of ways to look at the same thing'. Others plunged into the complexities of practitioner research with a different perspective:

Practitioner research identifies, defines and supports new learning relevant to our specific field of inquiry. It is conducted to improve practice through better understanding ... it is better informed by the experience and expertise of the researcher and is validated by its grounding in real-life, ongoing situations.

Another participant, a social work practitioner for almost 30 years, saw that:

Being in the field challenges one's knowledge base constantly, particularly if you are open to changing your approach based on learning on the job. Many of us have practice knowledge of the field that we know we operate from. We also know that to impose services and solutions is often useless unless one engages with the person or families involved in the research. Yet much research is carried out often by agencies who have little day to day knowledge of the lives of the people they are researching.

Improved Links between Research and Practice

As experienced and senior social work practitioners within their agencies, participants at the outset of the programme sought to make connections between

research and practice. In particular, their views of themselves as researchers of practice posed interesting questions and some challenges:

Practitioners lack the confidence and the sense that they have legitimate questions to ask in terms of research ... [they still view research as] the occupation of academics and government departments and not practitioners ... research is constructed and presented by academics and policy makers with little day to day knowledge of the lives of the people they are researching. They do not often ask the right questions ... [Consequently] their research serves to estrange rather than engage participants and practitioners; ... as a practitioner researcher, I sought to put the researched population central to the research process. In so doing I hoped that the research outcome would have a direct impact on the lives of the researched population. This was very important for me as a practitioner who was engaging in research.

A participant spoke of how his confidence developed over his participation on the course:

This course has helped me to develop my confidence in myself as a researcher. I now realise that I can do research on my practice and deal with the issues of objectivity and bias that before the course, and even at the start of the course, I found hard to understand and to reconcile ... I now realise that research and practice are not the separate activities I always thought they were. I have learned that as a practitioner, I can engage in practice research that has validity. This has been a big learning for me over the last two years ... I was so afraid of my own bias that when I was interviewing I stuck strictly to the questions on my interview guide. I did not ask follow up questions or even get the kids to elaborate on what they were saying. I was very conscious of my position as a researcher and the knowledge I had as a practitioner. I was afraid if I strayed from the questions at all I might corrupt the research data.

The confidence-building that various participants associated with their course participation seemed to spread out within the agency, among fellow workers:

We know social workers do not value their experience in terms of knowledge creation. They do not see themselves as researchers and therefore their knowledge is seldom put out there in a public arena. Other professions are better than social work in this respect. When I was on the course I talked to my colleagues about what I was doing. I was involved in a type of role modelling. I think it gave them a confidence to think that they too could do the same. Research no longer seemed so remote and removed from their practice.

New Knowledge of Practice

A participant referred to the benefits of undertaking research and the contribution that this research made towards developing practice knowledge:

Doing the research project helped me to gain confidence not only as researcher of practice but it also helped me in practice by providing fresh insights and new knowledge. If I had not done this research and engaged the kids in it the way I did I may never have valued the knowledge the kids have that practitioners like me and service providers need to know.

The partnership that grew between the researcher and the researched was emphasised:

What was particularly striking was that the research itself had its own life. Instant answers were not expected. Service users engaged with me in partnership and owned the process much more.

The mystique that surrounds the research enterprise was something participants battled to overcome: 'Are research and practice completely different activities?' Some practical unforeseen challenges were represented:

There were a lot of practical issues and technical knowledge that I had to learn in order to complete the course. This was time consuming in a way that I had not fully considered prior to participating on the course. I also had to learn to do a proper literature review, using updated resources and new technology e.g. the library cataloguing system, interlibrary loan system, internet explorer, word processing and electronic journals.

Appreciation of Learning Scaffolds: The Reflective Portfolio, Peers and Public Presentations

Throughout the research, participants highlighted the importance of the portfolio and the learning journal in scaffolding and promoting their ongoing learning and development throughout the course:

My attraction to this type of Masters programme was directly related to its use of the portfolio. I have been interested in reflective inquiry for some time now. As the portfolio was centrally located in this programme, it presented me with an opportunity to use it, while undertaking a piece of research. I found the whole idea exciting.

This participant described the research process as 'a journey, at times confusing and frustrating with a creative element'. She highlighted the learning journal as integral to the course and to supporting the reflective process:

Central to the portfolio process was the keeping of a diary (journal) where we wrote our thoughts and reflections on the research process and our learning journey as novice researchers of practice. In the journal I wrote down my doubts, thoughts, ideas and feelings as I was going along. I shared some journal entries in class.

The challenges experienced by a participant when completing the learning journal are highlighted in the following extract:

I found it difficult to get into writing a journal. I was very self-conscious writing it. I was not used to writing and putting my thoughts and feelings down on paper. It was challenging for me, even more so when I had to read it out to the others in the group [but] the learning journal provided me with a space to think about what I was doing. Peer group and the course facilitator were all a great help. They enabled and encouraged me to keep going and at times that was difficult with all the other demands on me.

Highlighting the emphasis the portfolio places on tracking the research process, a participant remarked:

The portfolio is a more holistic way of learning. The reflective process left me feeling *uncomfortable. At times nothing made sense. I had no answers and I found that space difficult. But as time went on I became more comfortable with not knowing.*

Nakkula & Ravitch (1998) refer to learners feeling ‘thrown’ and ‘uprooted’ by the reflective learning process. Participants also spoke of having to take risks in their research practice:

I had to learn to take risks. I didn't know what issues were going to arise in the interviews. To my surprise the groups were able to facilitate themselves and managed.

The portfolio process, which includes the learning journal and peer support, helped ‘to bring the researcher, the researched, the research process and context all together’.

The peer group was identified as a place of safety and trust where their feelings of uncertainty could be contained and addressed. The peer support group promoted a connectedness between participants:

It helped to prevent the feelings of isolation that practitioners doing research often experience. Peer involvement meant that the research journey was not taken alone. It was supported and shared with the course facilitator and course participants, who were all professional practitioners.

The peer group process provided a place where they felt they could engage safely: The whole process of making my research questions public to my peer group helped me gain a greater sense of my own identity as a researcher. Peers were all practitioners who had knowledge of the practice and the practice context where my research was located. My confidence developed in sharing my research as the course progressed.

Confidence-building emerged as a continuous theme throughout the data. Moving beyond the familiar comfort zone of practice into an arena that was less familiar involved risk-taking:

I experienced the course and the research process as a risk taking endeavour: I was in unfamiliar territory, which as an experienced practitioner was an anxious space.

Development of a Culture of Reflective Inquiry

When asked to outline the main areas of learning, a participant remarked that the ‘value of engaging in reflective inquiry when engaging in researching questions of practice was very important’. The same person stressed the importance for him of ‘connecting my voice as a practitioner to my emerging voice as a researcher of practice’. Commenting further on his experience of the research process, he said:

I discovered that the process of reflection requires the practitioner/researcher to avoid the temptation of second guessing answers but instead to develop a culture/discipline in order to further their investigations. The development of this culture of reflection can effect [sic] and challenge some of the fundamental elements of an individual's practice. The use of reflective questioning enabled me as the practitioner researcher to unearth new aspects of my practice through uncovering new elements in the research. Reflective inquiry allows the practitioner/researcher to create new knowledge and re-create themselves within their professions.

Conclusions and Future Developments

The portfolio and research inquiry processes make several contributions to practitioners' ways of knowing. As course directors we identify the following as potential achievements of the inquiry process with the suggestion that these ought to be the subject of future systematic investigations and study. We believe participants in this programme:

- have achieved knowledge and understanding of the strategies of inquiry; the power of framing questions; the process of designing an interrogation; the significance of evidence, and the nature of adequate or inadequate evidence
- are aware of the kind of knowledge that can be acquired through inquiry
- have identified how new knowledge is shaping or can shape their professional practice
- have acknowledged that the reflective research inquiry process allows students to become aware of the process of inquiry at a meta-cognitive level—that is, of how they know how they know.

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