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Promoting reflective practice with older people: learning and teaching strategies

Mark Hughes
Southern Cross University

Karen Heycox
University of New South Wales

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**Promoting reflective practice with older people:
learning & teaching strategies**

Author address

Mark Hughes & Karen Heycox
School of Social Work
University of New South Wales
Sydney NSW 2052

Author information

Mark Hughes is a Lecturer in the School of Social Work, University of New South Wales. Email: mark.hughes@unsw.edu.au

Karen Heycox is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work, University of New South Wales. Email: k.heycox@unsw.edu.au

Both authors have had practice experience with older people, as well as having taught and researched extensively in this area. We are currently interested in student attitudes toward older people, particularly the impact of increasing their knowledge of ageing issues and their preparedness to reflect on their values, attitudes and practice. Part of this paper was presented at the 2004 Global Social Work Congress 'Reclaiming Civil Society' in Adelaide.

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Abstract

Social work with older people is often characterised as low status and dominated by medicalised constructions of old age. Consequently there is a need for educational responses that address students' negative attitudes toward older people and enable the development of practice skills in this area. This paper evaluates an elective course for third year social work students that challenged their perceptions of their own and others' ageing, and stimulated a reflective approach to practice with older people. Reflective learning techniques were employed in the course, including observations in aged care service settings. Students in the course showed a high degree of interest in working with older people in the future and, although this did not increase much throughout the course, they evaluated it positively, noting greater awareness of issues affecting older people.

Key words

Reflective learning, older people, observation

Introduction

Australia, like other countries, has an ageing population (Borowski & Hugo 1997) and with the growth in associated services, the potential for social work practice with this population is considerable (Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson & Feldman 2000; Mehta, Tan & Joshi 2000). However, given that work with older people is often regarded as low status, it has not been easy to recruit social workers in this area (Cummings, Galambos & De Coster 2003). And considering the complexity of issues facing this population, it is essential that those social workers who do work in the area are able to do so competently and reflexively (Mehta *et al.* 2000). In this paper, we present and evaluate a course that challenged student attitudes toward this population and their own ageing experiences. The focus of the course was on developing skills in reflective practice with older people; in part this was stimulated through direct observations of older people in aged care service settings.

Context & background

Aged care tends to be dominated by medical constructions of ageing that are reflected in the dominance of a health, or rather an ill health, focus (McCallum 1997). Old age is constructed as a physical decline (Estes & Binney 1989) and frailty is emphasised through the surveillance of health care providers (Kaufman 1994). For some, ageing is a disease that needs to be cured rather than lived with and experienced (Bramstedt 2001). These constructions are apparent not just in aged care practice, but also in educational institutions. For example, at our own University there was recent controversy over the proposed naming of the ageing component of the new medical degree as 'Regressions and Endings'.

In contrast, social work potentially offers a more wholistic approach to understanding ageing experiences and to aged care service provision, which encompasses more creative

ways of working with older people, including a focus on strengths (Scharlach *et al.* 2000; Saleebey 1992). However, some negative attitudes toward older people are evident within the social work profession and among social work students (Tan, Hawkins & Ryan 2001). Research on student attitudes indicates that they tend to be most negative toward the older and more unwell groups in the older population, especially men over the age of 75 (Hatchett, Holmes & Ryan 2002; Tan *et al.* 2001).

Part of the challenge for social work is not only to attract more social workers into aged care, but to attract those who have a genuine interest in and commitment to working with older people. Consequently educators need to address barriers that may affect students' lack of interest in this area of work (Olson 2002; Berkman, Silverstone, Simmons, Volland & Howe 2000). Overseas studies have identified different factors influencing students' commitment to this area. Most clearly, those who have had a close relationship with an older person in the past are likely to have more positive attitudes toward them, have greater knowledge of their circumstances and want to work with them (Gorelik, Damron-Rodriguez, Funderburk & Solomon 2000; Hatchett *et al.* 2002; Tan *et al.* 2001). Attendance at a gerontology course also appears to be significantly related to attitudes towards, knowledge of and interest in working with older people (Olson 2002).

Ageism in social work students and the social work profession is not a new phenomenon. Fifteen years ago one of us wrote about the ageism of practitioners and educators, including the lack of aged courses in social work programs (Heycox 1989). As a response to this concern, a course on working with older people was developed and implemented with eleven final year students. The feedback was very positive and the enthusiasm related as much to the positive role modelling of the facilitator as it did to the content (Heycox 1990). Despite the positive feedback, overall lack of student interest in this area meant that the course ran only for one year. In 2001 a course, 'Older People, the Family and Society' was introduced by Professor Richard Hugman, while the current course, referred to in this paper, was offered from 2002. As with the two previous courses, a focus of our course is on exploring the students' values and how these inform their attitudes and practice toward older people.

Approach & content of the course

The course, 'Reflective Practice with Older People', takes place in the second half of the third year of the four-year Bachelor of Social Work program. It is one of a number of courses offered at that time, of which students must complete two. At the beginning of the year students indicate their order of preference for involvement in these courses. The focus of this discussion and evaluation is on the course that was run in 2003. In that year two seminar groups were formed comprising 29 students in total. It is worth noting that only one seminar group was run in 2004 due to lower popularity of the course compared to others offered. Total class time for the course was 21 hours, comprising seven 3-hour fortnightly seminars: the groups met in alternate weeks. Assessment comprised four short discussion papers on journal articles, reports on two observations of older people in aged care settings, and a 1500 word reflective and theoretical discussion paper on a practice issue raised by the observations.

The focus of this course was on enabling students to gain knowledge and skills in reflective practice with older people. Reflective practice and reflective learning are inter-

related concepts, commonly associated with the application to social work of the ideas of Schön (1983), as well as those of Dewey (1933) on experiential learning and Kolb (1984) on the cycle of experiential learning, which includes a key stage of reflective observation. From a reflective position, social work comprises complex and often ambiguous tasks, which can be learned through engaging in action and reflecting on that action. Important is Schön's oft-cited distinction between 'reflection in action' (reflecting and applying as action takes place) and 'reflection on action' (reflecting on past experience). This post-action reflection is claimed by Boud and Knights (1996, p.26) to involve three stages: 'returning to the experience, attending to feelings connected with the experience and re-evaluating the experience through recognizing implications and outcomes.' It is also possible that planning or preparation for action involves a reflective exercise of reviewing past action and learning, and identifying salient points for the forthcoming action.

Reflective practice is sometimes positioned against a more technical approach to practice through which competence emerges from the application of pre-determined rules and procedures (Briggs 1999). For Le Riche (1998a) reflective practice involves workers engaging in an ongoing dialogue between their personal and professional selves in developing their practice knowledge and skills. Reflective practice requires the practitioner-learner to use their whole self in reflecting on and integrating knowledge into their work. According to Payne (1998, p.122)

any situation may need us to develop and change our guidelines, responding to new aspects of the work and to social circumstances that we meet. We must look underneath the surface relationship and events which are presented to us. ... Because this kind of flexibility is the essence of dealing with any human being and being effective in working on complex human problems, critical awareness and reflection is an important practical implementation of the social work value of respecting human individuality and rights.

While reflective practice is sometimes seen as antithetical to evidence-based practice, the opening up of the notion of 'evidence' to include not just empirical findings but also other sources of evidence, including client experiences (Witkin & Harrison 2001), suggests the possibility of integration.

In addition to a focus on reflective practice and learning, the course drew on social gerontology perspectives and highlighted the diversity and strengths of the older population. It examined common theoretical approaches to ageing and considered the multiple and contested meanings of the concepts of old and older age, including various categorisations such as young-old/old-old. While for the purpose of this paper we refer generally to 'older people' and 'older age', as we discuss with students in the course, we are mindful of their constructedness. We also examined with students the construction of other concepts, such as ageism, dependence, risk, disability, care-giving and elder abuse. Students were introduced to current developments in Australian aged care policy and practice, including residential care, community care, case management, risk management, active ageing and intergenerational work. All topics were presented and facilitated by the authors except for a session on 'families and caring' presented by Professor Richard Hugman. It was expected that during the course students would reflect on their own relationships with older people in both professional and non-professional situations. Table 1 outlines the content of the course and its assessment. In terms of learning outcomes, by the end of the course it was expected that students would have:

- Developed an awareness of different theoretical approaches to ageing, including social gerontology perspectives.
- Examined concepts that reflect and influence society's view of ageing and older people.
- Developed skills in observation in aged care service settings.
- Examined the potential of reflective practice with older people.

Table 1: Course content & assessment

Week	Topics	Assessment
1/2	Perceptions & images of ageing. Reflective practice. Benefits of being older.	
3/4	Theories of ageing. Population ageing. Old age, diversity & oppression/multiple disadvantage.	
5/6	Families & caring. Community care policy & practice. Advocacy & rights work in community care.	Four short papers on journal articles.
7/8	Residential care policy & practice. Advocacy & rights work in residential settings.	
9/10	Risk & ageing. Managing & facilitating risk-taking. Assessing & intervening in elder abuse.	
11/12	Working with people with dementia & their families.	
13/14	Active ageing, intergenerational work & social networks. Review of learning.	Observation reports & discussion paper.

Strategies for transferring reflective practice and learning ideas to social work education are well documented (e.g. Gould & Taylor 1996). Boud and Knights (1996) provide suggestions to enable a context for reflection in learning experiences. These include providing an explanation of the educational approach adopted in the course, staff modelling reflective discussion, ensuring there is sufficient time to enable reflection and treating reflection as a normal activity. In our course we explained the purpose of and rationale for reflective learning and spent time reflecting on our own experiences and dilemmas as social workers working with older people. We developed a series of exercises that facilitated individual, pair and group reflection. At times, these required students to reflect on past action or experiences (e.g. on their own contacts with older people) and at other times it required them to engage in action (e.g. via a role play), using knowledge in this action and then reflecting on the experience. We also encouraged students to reflect forwardly; that is, to anticipate how they might act in the future. For example, one exercise required students to imagine their ideal lifestyle in older age and then consider the sorts of emotional and material resources needed to maintain this lifestyle if faced with a major disability.

Reflection is also facilitated by observation (Briggs 1999), which can be seen not just as one stage in a learning cycle (Kolb 1984) but as a purposeful reflective activity in its own right. In the United Kingdom the use of observation to facilitate reflective practice has been promoted by those influenced by the Tavistock Institute's child observation model. This model was originally developed for use in child psychotherapy (Bick 1964) but has since been extended for use in qualifying and post-qualifying social work training (King

2002) and has been applied to a range of service users, including older people (MacKenzie Smith 1994). Extending from debates about the relationship between the observer and observed in psychoanalysis and ethnography, and in drawing on social work values to inform observational processes, Tanner (1998) advocates an equality model which applies a 'power lens' to observational encounters. This involves careful negotiation in planning observations and recognising the power that co-exists with an observer's gaze. It also involves detailed post-observation reflection on the power differentials evident and the use of the experience to inform more equitable practice.

While the observations used in our course differed from the model employed by the Tavistock Institute and that proposed by Le Riche and Tanner (1998), they did retain some common elements, including a focus on power and difference and a reflection on implications for practice. Students were required to conduct two one-hour observations in a health, welfare or aged care service setting where older people were present and in which there were direct implications for professional social work practice. This setting was a public place (e.g. a day respite centre, nursing home activities room, hospital waiting area) and afforded students the opportunity to observe older clients interacting with staff and other clients. We specified that the setting should be open and public because it provides the observer with some anonymity and does not unduly interfere with the usual activities in that setting. Permission was gained for the observations by approaching the organisation and gaining authority beforehand. Permission to observe was not sought from those who were present in the public space and in most cases the large volume of people through the space meant that this was not practically feasible. However, students were advised that if they were ever asked what they were doing, they should answer honestly and provide evidence of the authorisation. In some cases, students requested that they carry out the observations in closed settings, such as a four-bed hospital ward. We felt that this would be overly intrusive and decided to keep the observations more oriented towards public spaces.

In contrast with the Tavistock approach where the observations are recorded in a narrative, in this course we asked students to record their observations in qualitative detail on forms supplied. These were to be completed after the event and no notes were to be taken during the observations as this was felt to be too invasive. The forms focused on:

- a. The physical layout of the setting (including space and obstacles) and older people's location and movement within it.
- b. The interactions (verbal and non-verbal) between older people, service providers and others.
- c. The expression of difference among the older people and the ways in which others responded to this difference.
- d. The representation of power in the interactions and in older people's engagement with the service setting.
- e. The potential for restructuring the interactions and/or the setting to facilitate more equitable practice.

Students were required to reflect further on their observation experience through their reflective and theoretical discussion paper, which discussed an issue raised in the observations, drawing on literature and research and identifying practice implications. Although the forms and the discussion paper provided a framework for the observations,

students were still encouraged to stay open to other experiences during the observations. This included paying attention to their own thoughts/feelings and how they may feel personally challenged by the observations. We expected that there would be for some a tension between the inner reflective dimension of the observation and the more outward behavioural aspect of observing. For some students this may possibly lead to a desire to see as much action as possible, over-emphasising the doing (both in terms of others' and their own behaviour) at the expense of thinking.

Methods

The evaluation of the course relied upon both quantitative and qualitative methods and examined students' experience of the course, their rating of its learning strategies, and the possible impact of the course on their preference for working with older people. Quantitative data was collected at two points. At the beginning and end of the course students were asked to rate their preference for working with older people on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 indicated that they never want to work with older people, while 10 indicated that they definitely want to work with them. We anticipated that exposure to the course would increase students' interest in working with older people. At the end of the course students also completed a standardised university questionnaire evaluating the quality of the course. This questionnaire evaluated items relating to teaching performance and course assessment on a series of five-point Likert-type scales with scores ranging from Excellent (5) to Very Poor (1). Quantitative results were analysed with the assistance of descriptive univariate statistics.

The standardised university questionnaire also provided space for some brief qualitative feedback on the best things about the course, how it could be improved, and why they chose the course. At the beginning and end of the course we also asked students to report on their perceptions of their own ageing and their interest in working with older people in the future. Further qualitative data was gained from small group discussions on the positive/negative aspects of the course, new areas of learning, and ideas for further development. The main points from this discussion were written up by the students and fed back to the whole class. We subsequently extracted qualitative data from the students' write-ups and our notes of the class discussion. This data was analysed thematically.

Student Evaluation

Overall, students evaluated the course positively. Table 2 outlines mean scores (5 = excellent) for 26 students who completed standardised university forms. On these forms students also explained why they chose the course, sometimes providing multiple responses. Of the 29 students 16 indicated that they chose this course because it was a required course in their program; 12 chose it because it sounded interesting; seven chose it because it is relevant to their career intentions; one selected it because of the teacher; and one chose it because it was allocated to them (the other courses being full). It should be noted that a considerable proportion of our group were initially interested in this area of practice, reflecting the fact that it was an elective course. Unfortunately this means that we were not able to compare the impact of the course on groups of students with differing levels of interest.

Table 2: Student evaluation based on standardised university forms (n=26)

Quality indicators	Interest generated	Contribution to knowledge & skills	Assessment appropriate	Objectives met	Teaching quality
Mean	4.08	4.21	4.31	4.35	4.33

Students' own perceptions of ageing

In examining students' perceptions of their own ageing, it was apparent that their main concerns were those of ill health and decreasing mental and physical capacities. These were closely followed by concerns about financial security in old age and the need for companionship. In comparing their responses in the first and last seminars, it appeared that in the latter, students emphasised the impact of negative cultural images of old age, with a couple indicating a desire to challenge these stereotypes in their personal/professional lives. By the end of the course two students spoke of the images of ageing as being superficial. Regarding ageism amongst professionals, one student noted at the end of the course that their one fear was 'being disempowered by health professionals; I fear this more than poverty.' A couple of students who did make positive comments in relation to their images of older people gave examples of people they knew. One student stated at the beginning of the course:

I would like to work with older people as they are very knowledgeable and experienced. I find it fascinating to explore their worldviews and concepts of reality, especially when they are very different to my own. I also have a close relationship with my grandfather.

Preferences for working with older people

A comparison of students' scores on the preferences for working with older people scale suggests minimal change. The mean scores for those students who attended both the first and last seminars (n=22), were 7.7 and 7.27 respectively (range=1-10). Possibly a better reflection of central tendency in this circumstance is the median and mode, with the former increasing from 7 to 8, and the latter increasing from 7 to 8 and 9. One student made an interesting comment about their progress during the course but also highlighted the challenges for educators:

At the beginning of the course I was not interested in working with older people at all. My interest level has increased over the semester; however working with older people still would not be my first career choice.

Another student acknowledged that while they were still not interested in working with older people, they recognised the issues raised in the course as being important because their work will inevitably bring them into contact with the elderly. For some students the observations provided their first experience of an aged care service setting and at times this was quite confronting. An implication of conducting the observations in clinical settings was that students were more likely to be exposed to problematised constructions of older age than if they had observed older people in non-clinical settings, such as

shopping centres. However for at least one student exposure to a nursing home provided the motivation for seeking change:

My last [observation] visit did make me consider my future as a social worker and even as an older person. These visits made me realise how much I would despise going to a nursing home, and also encouraged me to consider why I would hate it. Analysing my dislike has given me more thought about how we should improve nursing homes to improve quality of life, and also help reduce the negative view of nursing homes in general.

Personal gains

Feedback from small groups and the standardised questionnaire noted that students had personally gained more self-awareness, as well as a new perspective, about their own prejudices/stereotypes toward older people. One student commented that she now sees the importance of 'not treating them as an alien' and another student noted that 'it was challenging in a personal sense'. In reflecting on personal situations (such as encountering older people while shopping) one small group talked about learning the need to have more patience. Two students specifically mentioned how they now reflect differently on their own interactions with family members. A couple of the small groups mentioned the positives they now see in growing older.

Professional gains

In evaluating what students had gained professionally from this course all groups spoke about how they could put their awareness of the impact of stereotyping and discrimination into practice. They referred to concepts such as respect, dignity and empowerment; they commented on how they had learned the importance of listening to the older person and not just those around them; and they saw the need to be advocates. One student commented on her learning from observations of older people and their relatives in a hospital waiting area:

I will never assume that younger family members are either supportive of their older family members, seek to represent the older person's wishes, or are available to help maintain an older person's independence. ... I will be ... working from the perspective that the client is the expert, looking for client strengths, and stopping ageist stereotypes from imposing on my work.

Students also commented on their increased knowledge of the relevant issues and resources, and their increased ability to reflect and be empathic in this area of practice. Notably one small group stated they were now able to be more open minded towards immobile people and look beyond their disability.

Feedback on observations

Overall, students reported that they found the observations to be challenging and useful. Some emphasised the way their stereotypes/assumptions about older people were challenged through their experiences. For example,

I learned a big lesson in stereotyping older people. I realised that there are some older people who look frail and are physically slow etc, but behave assertively when the need arises... Conversely, I realised that there are some older people who look and act younger but when it comes to standing up for themselves [they] are unable to.

Some students noted the challenges posed by observing private and intimate acts, particularly given the inability to gain consent from all those in the setting. A student who conducted her observations in a hospital clinic waiting area commented:

At times I felt guilty invading the patients' privacy and carrying out the observations without consent. This also prevented my full attention to the task at hand. ... My feelings of being uncomfortable with the process of this task were eased as I wrote up the report and reflected on the purpose and my new learning.

The power of the observer's gaze was also felt to impact on staff: 'The second observation sort of made me feel I was assessing the service providers, with begrudging consent. [Although] in reality the Practice Manager was very helpful.' Conducting two visits in the same setting posed issues for some students: 'I felt that most of what I was observing for this visit was very similar to the first one.' Although others recognised the value of two visits to facilitate more detailed reflection: 'It enabled me to pick up on the subtle and implicit practices.' Others noted the challenge of sitting and thinking when they would ordinarily be involved in the action: 'I felt awkward just sitting there ... while all the volunteers and staff were busy.' Despite the challenges, most students noted the positives of observation as a tool for facilitating reflection and awareness of power in service settings and interactions.

Suggestions

Students suggested reorganising the timing of the classes to one and a half hours weekly (rather than fortnightly) and using some guest speakers. Using guest speakers from older persons' activist groups might also be a strategy to counter the more negative images of ageing that students may encounter when conducting observations in clinical settings. Some students also felt that they should have had some class contact time reduced to compensate for the time taken to arrange and conduct the observations. It was also suggested that the observation reports be due earlier than the discussion paper to help stagger the assessment tasks.

Issues in Further Development

There were a number of issues that arose in presenting this course, which have implications for its ongoing development. While much of the emphasis of the course was on students' own personal experiences and reflections, they appeared to find it difficult writing about their personal experiences after their observations. Students also seemed to find it difficult drawing out implications for their practice from the readings. In these analyses they tended to write about social work as a profession rather than as their own personal practice. The difficulty may have arisen because this type of analysis is a departure from their usual scholarly writing where 'objectivity' is highly valued. Educators are left with the challenge of how to get students to reflect at a more personal level for specific purposes. In future courses we will explain in more detail the value of

personal reflection to facilitate reflective learning and practice. We will also be more explicit about appropriateness of the personal pronoun in scholarly writing and the importance of recognising and discussing oneself and one's values in social work writing.

An important issue that arose for students was the negotiation of public and private spaces in conducting the observations. We discussed with students the ways in which different spaces might be more or less public. For example, a hospital reception area may be more public and open than an activities room in a nursing home. With the students, we also recognised that private behaviours occur not just in closed settings but open settings, and that they may witness, without consent, intimate encounters. This is not an issue that can be easily resolved particularly in relation to culturally sensitive practices. For example, one indigenous agency chose not to allow an Aboriginal student to do these observations in their reception area, arguing that this would be overly intrusive. In circumstances such as these, students and agency workers are sensitive to the power of the observer's gaze – 'being watched can ... feel like being judged and found wanting' (Le Riche 1998b) – even where the observed are not fully aware of the observer's role. It is important then that students are provided the opportunity, in their write-ups of the observations, to reflect on their perception of their influence as an observer in the setting and on the power differentials evident within the setting and the interactions.

Another issue relating to the observations was the desire felt by students to see 'action' and the complaint that sometimes there was little happening or that it was not useful to conduct both observations in the same setting. We now wonder whether this expectation by students was partly a result of the framework devised for these observations as structured by the forms. Were they anxious about having observed enough so that they could complete the forms adequately? Disappointment at having to observe the same setting twice could have been countered by discussing with students the value of developing tentative hypotheses in the first observation that could be checked out in the second (Briggs 1999). As in practice situations, concerns about 'action' may relate to the expectation of students (and practitioners) that one must be always 'doing' in social work, in a narrow task-centred and outcome-oriented sense. The difficulties that practitioners and students experience in holding back from action are widely acknowledged in observational literature (e.g. Briggs 1999, King 2002, Miles 2002). As Briggs (1999, p.151) argues, observations provide 'the opportunity for thinking about meaning separate from professional role activity.'

Population ageing and the potential of social work in the development of wholistic services for older people highlight the importance of aged care courses in social work programs. A preliminary step in lobbying for more ageing content would be an audit, like the recent audit on mental health content funded by the Department of Health and Ageing (National Standards Implementation Group Secretariat 2003), on the amount and nature of course material on working with older people. This includes links between what happens in the classroom and the field experience. University and field educators need to acknowledge that they are key people in providing students with opportunities in this growing area of practice. Also, more importantly in terms of the core concern of this study, is the fact that they are role models of anti-ageist practices.

Conclusion

Students' engagement with and evaluation of this course highlights some tensions in promoting, through education strategies, equitable and reflective practice with older people. While some students were primarily motivated to be involved in the course because of their interest in this area, the course appears to have had little direct impact on their preference for working with older people. However, with mean scores of 7.7 and 7.2 at the beginning and end of the course, this interest was relatively high anyway. Despite this, student interest in the wider year cohort is not strong as evidenced by the decision to run only one course in 2004 due to higher preferences for other courses. Nevertheless the course was evaluated positively by students and it did appear, based on qualitative data, to increase students' awareness of their own ageism in their personal and professional lives. It also provided an opportunity for exploring a range of issues and resources in this field of practice.

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