

Engaging practitioners with critical reflection: issues and dilemmas

Christine Morley*

Deakin University, Australia

This paper presents a reflective account of my teaching practice with health practitioners who work as school nurses in the secondary education system in regional Victoria, Australia. It highlights some of the issues and dilemmas that emerged during my experiences, as a social work educator, facilitating workshops about critically reflective learning as a cross-disciplinary enterprise. Using critical reflection, this paper also raises questions regarding how we might respond to some of the challenges to improve future approaches to teaching critical reflection.

Introduction

What are some of difficulties and dilemmas in facilitating critical reflection workshops for school nurses as a social work educator? And how we use critical reflection to improve our practice and education with professional colleagues who may have disciplinary backgrounds and values that may differ from our own? This paper begins by outlining the theoretical frameworks I use to conceptualize critical reflection. It then presents a reflective account of my teaching practice with registered nurses who work in the secondary school system in regional Victoria, Australia. In providing an analysis of this work, I am not presenting it as complete, or as a model of best practice. Rather, I merely plan to highlight some of the issues that emerged. Using critical reflection, this paper also raises questions regarding how we might respond to some of the dilemmas inherent in engaging practitioners in reflecting learning.

*School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences, Deakin University, Geelong Waterfront, Australia, 3220. Email: christine.morley@deakin.edu.au

What bodies of literature do I draw on? And what sorts of frameworks and perspectives do I use?

In contextualizing this paper, the primary frameworks and perspectives I use to understand and inform critical reflection are critical theories such as feminism (Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1986; Marchant & Wearing, 1986; Dominelli, 2002; Clift, 2005), structural (Moreau, 1979; Mullaly, 1993, 2002), radical (Fook, 1993) perspectives, and critical postmodernism (Leonard, 1997; Fook, 1996, 2002; Ife, 1997; Pease & Fook, 1999; Allan *et al.*, 2003; Hick *et al.*, 2005). This combination essentially draws on a structural and gendered analysis while also using an interpretive framework in that the links between the individual and the social are made explicit through analysis of how language and social practices produce and construct meaning (Ife, 1997). Critical postmodern principles and critique extend modernist critical theories by recognizing and reconstructing the limitations of modernist conceptions of power, identity, dichotomous categories, universal narratives, and so on. Complementing these approaches, I also utilize constructivist and experiential approaches to learning (Brookfield, 1990; Mezirow, 1990; Dore, 1994; Fook, 2002) to generate theory inductively through reflection on practice. Fook adapted the ideas about the reflective approach, first developed by educationalists Argyris and Schön (1976; Schön, 1983) to critical social work practice, and combined these inductive learning processes with critical postmodern ideas to develop the notion of critical reflection in social work (Fook, 1996, 2002). It is this model of critical reflection that I also use in my practice and teaching.

How do I conceptualize critical reflection?

I conceptualize critical reflection in terms of a process or means of achieving the following goals.

1. To improve practice

Because critical reflection highlights disparities between a practitioner's espoused theories and their actual practice (Argyris & Schön, 1976; Schön, 1983), it promotes congruencies between critical aims and critical practice. It also draws attention not just to the values that inform our practice, but also the process of how we implement critical values in practice. Critical values in this sense are 'primarily concerned with practicing in ways which further a society without domination, exploitation and oppression' focusing 'both on how structures dominate, but also on how people construct and are constructed by changing social structures and relations' (Fook, 2002, p. 18). My understanding of critical reflection is therefore that it allows us to examine our own implicit, previously unexamined assumptions which might limit or undermine our intended or espoused practice (Brookfield, 1990; Fook, 2002). This may include challenging our own

self-interests and values and assumptions may also take possible contributions brings us to the

2. To change and

Through reflection may be able to clarify conceptualizations, liberate us in a way that enhances capacity for understanding and critical unde

3. To create possibilities necessarily condu

Critical reflection: certain contexts, modern insight, 'both activism [are] rejection' emphasizes the dominant power (Fook, 1999, p. 2) is a mixture of extending this international context practice.

The critical re

In 2003, Dr M... school nurses with an industry partner provider.

The critical reflection service organization the acting head of I became involved negotiated. The and espoused th

networks and

atives I use to
h as feminism
ominelli, 2002;
radical (Fook,
Fook, 1996,
L., 2005). This
ysis while also
vidual and the
social practices
principles and
onstructing the
ous categories,
, I also utilize
1990; Mezirow,
ough reflection
first developed
cal social work
tical postmod-
k (Fook, 1996,
y practice and

f achieving the

ner's espoused
hön, 1983), it
. It also draws
the process of
this sense are
society without
structures domi-
changing social
f critical reflec-
iously unexam-
d or espoused
nging our own

self-interests and scrutinizing how our own social positioning and implicit beliefs, values and assumptions may be complicit with inequitable social arrangements. It may also take the form, for example, of examining how we understand, and possible contribute to our own sense of powerlessness in certain contexts, which brings us to the next point.

2. To change and challenge dominant power relations and structures:

Through reflecting on and deconstructing our own interpretations of a situation, we may be able to challenge internal barriers in our thinking which preclude other possible conceptualizations and options. In this sense, using critical reflection can potentially liberate us from the way we construct structural problems to reconstruct them in a way that emphasizes our own personal agency to respond (Fook, 2002). 'This capacity for unsettling or destabilizing commonly held or accepted beliefs is potentially one of the most powerful sets of strategies which arise from a postmodern and critical understanding' (Fook, 2002, p. 90).

3. To create possibilities to practice critically in organizational contexts that are not necessarily conducive to critical practice

Critical reflection forces us to reflect on how we subjectively position ourselves within certain contexts and discourses in relation to social structure. Using critical postmodern insight, 'both exclusive modernist universalism and an exclusive postmodern relativism [are] rejected' (Pease & Fook, 1999, p. 219). Instead, critical postmodernism 'emphasizes the emancipatory possibilities for challenging, resisting and changing dominant power structures', through using the processes of deconstruction (Pease & Fook, 1999, p. 203). Given that critical postmodern perspectives intimate that reality is a mixture of external factors and our own internal engagement with them, acknowledging this internal component repositions us with the agency to respond to organizational contexts (Fook, 2002), which are constructed as problematic for critical practice.

The critical reflection program

In 2003, Dr Martyn Jones and I facilitated several critical reflection workshops for school nurses working within secondary schools. The program was offered as part of an industry partnership between Deakin University and a major, local human service provider.

The critical reflection program was initiated by the senior managers of the human service organization, and developed in consultation with them by Dr Jones, who was the acting head of our social work course at the time. As a more junior staff member, I became involved with the program after the terms of the consultancy had been negotiated. The critical reflection consultancy was based on the following principles and espoused the following aims:

- To introduce the reflective practice approach to school nurses.
- To educate school nurses in the basic processes of critical reflection.
- To assist school nurses in the use of critical reflection as a personal process in evaluating their everyday work practices.
- To begin to develop, in a collaborative way and from actual practice experience, models for best practice in different contexts.
- To provide the basis for the organization to use critical reflection in an ongoing ways in the school nurse program (Jones, 2003).

The program consisted of three and a half days in total. The first half day of the program introduced participants to the theoretical underpinnings and purposes of critical reflection. To model the critical reflection process, I initially deconstructed a critical incident from my own practice. Participants were also provided with supplementary readings and guidelines for reflection to clarify and reinforce the material and purpose of the workshops.

This was followed by three days of experiential learning about critical reflection, spaced approximately four weeks apart. During the second day, each group participant presented a critical incident from their own practice that expressed particular dilemmas or challenges for them about their work. The group then assisted each group member to begin deconstructing their incident. During the third day, each group member's incident was re-visited for further discussion and analysis to focus on reconstructing their practice and inductively generating theory from reflecting on the experience that could be used to improve future practice (Fook, 2002). The final day focused on drawing out the major themes that had emerged from the critical incidents presented in the group, and consolidating the overall learning that had been developed.

The participants

The school nurses who participated in these critical reflection workshops were registered nurses, who are employed in secondary schools to work with students. They describe their roles in terms of performing functions similar to welfare and social workers within the secondary education system including: counseling, support, advocacy, education and so on. The school nurse program represents a relatively new State government initiative, implemented in the Australian state of Victoria within recent years.

Demographically the group consisted entirely of eight women, predominantly aged in their thirties and forties. Quite coincidentally, all but two, had recently separated or divorced from their partners. This appeared to provide the personal backdrop to a professional context permeated by a profound sense of anxiety and distress. The school nurses discussed feeling uncertain about their roles, crystallized by a lack of support from their management, and no appropriate induction process, orientation, staff development or training.

What are the workshops?

There were several workshops, the compulsory ones were the ones we were being perceived as being confused and constructed and addressed.

Setting the staff and the claimed their shops, except the initial meeting it would be in to ensure that it begins. In without the e sources of the situation, feedback critical reflection.

The notion of pants as some problematic situation nature sits for critical reflection fort was the re their manager.

I was aware of them in opposition tendency including a justification ment: the opposition suspicion, but the critical reflection.

Another issue is a need to negotiate critical, I could a critical incident being placed in encountered a

Terminology any incident for

What are the major issues my experience of facilitating critical reflection workshops raises for me?

There were several issues that emerged for me during the workshops. These included: the compulsory nature of the critical reflection program within the organization for whom we were offering the consultancy; resistance by the nurses to critical reflection; being perceived by the school nurses as in alignment with the nurses' management; confusion regarding the terminology of critical reflection and; my own assumptions and constructions about each of these issues. Each of these will now be separately addressed.

Setting the context for this consultancy, despite many meetings between University staff and the school nurse management to ensure the contrary, the school nurses claimed their management had not informed them about the critical reflection workshops, except to say that they were compulsory to attend. Whilst I wasn't involved in the initial meetings prior to the commencement of the consultancy, in future I believe it would be imperative for the facilitators of the program to meet with the participants to ensure that they are adequately informed and consulted about the program before it begins. In hindsight, that the arrangements for the program were established without the essential input of the participants, may have been one to the major sources of the nurses' disquiet and resistance during the workshops. Given this situation, feedback from initial evaluations confirmed that their expectations for the critical reflection program were not positive.

The notion that critical reflection in this context was constructed by the participants as something that had been involuntarily imposed by their management was problematic for me during these consultancies, particularly because this mandatory nature sits fundamentally at odds with the emancipatory intentions and potential of critical reflection (Fook, 2002, 2004). Compounding and complicating this discomfort was the repeated suggestion from the school nurses that I may really be a 'spy' for their management, whom they expressed a profound distrust.

I was aware that a discourse constructed by school nurse practitioners that cast them in opposition from their management. I also felt that this dichotomizing tendency included me in a way which aligned me with their management. Providing a justification for the program appeared tantamount to colluding with their management: the oppressors. This is not to suggest that there was no foundation for their suspicion, but at the time, I saw this as potentially unhelpful for their participation in the critical reflection workshops.

Another issue that surfaced almost immediately was the realization that there was a need to negotiate and clarify taken-for-granted meanings. Even for terms such as critical, I could not assume that there was a shared meaning. The nurses initially saw a critical incident as a medical emergency, often resulting in a death. Consequently being placed in school settings, many of the nurses initially believed that they had not encountered any critical incidents in their current role.

Terminology regarding critical incidents was subsequently broadened to include any incident from their practice that they may have felt challenged by, or just wanted

to learn more about. While acknowledging that there may be some parallels with their notion of critical incident debriefing, we delineated that it was more than just looking back over an incident and talking about what had happened. Consistent with my understanding of the goals of critical reflection outlined earlier, critical incident analysis was discussed as involving systematic critical reflection, examining and challenging dominant power relations and structures, and using critical postmodern principles and critique in order to reconstruct unhelpful assumptions grounded in modernism (Ife, 2000; Fook, 2002). A shared understanding eventually emerged where the school nurses recognized the different learning opportunities involved, including: improving practice, learning about critical postmodern frameworks; ongoing development of theory from their practice and identification of unhelpful barriers in their practice. In reflecting on this last point it is important to note that whilst de-centering the school nurses' notions of 'truth' was integral to uncovering other possible interpretations of their stories and developing narratives that were more enabling, I may have emphasized this aspect a little too early initially. To ensure participants feel heard and supported, it is crucial to spend adequate time to understand and validate their experiences, before deconstructing and looking at how their view might also hinder them, so that they do not just feel dismissed.

Reflections and dilemmas in facilitating critical reflection with this group

Working with underlying dichotomies

As the nurses talked about their practice and their professional roles within the school settings, there was a lot of angst in the room and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. School nurse participants were often visibly distressed and tearful in reflecting on their professional experiences in the context of their schools. Much of their discussion emphasized a sense of not coping. One participant, for example, told me she had cried, and felt very sad for four days after a previous workshop. I felt clear at the time, as I still do now, that her response had not been as a result of the workshops, but more indicative of what was happening for her more broadly in her professional and personal life. I was, however, very aware of the challenging nature of the workshops and the emotional impact of the critically reflective learning, perhaps in a way that is more profound than other approaches to learning. Rather than seeing myself and the workshops as external to her engagement with the difficulties she was struggling with in her life, as I did at the time, it may have been useful to explicitly discuss some of the layers and complexities of these issues with the school nurses. Whilst I did acknowledge and support the women for having the courage to examine their assumptions, I believe I should have done more to validate the personal impact of their professional experiences, and discuss the links between the two in highlighting the personal challenges that critical reflection may involve.

I was aware of some of the binaries in my thinking which seemed to cast the group on one hand as hostile, resistant, even at times, aggressive, while on the other, as intensely vulnerable. The major dilemma inherent in this was that I wanted to assist

the women to those constructs in binary. Yet, at the same time, there was unrest for the destabilizing that quite traumatic workshops were recognizing this workshops to be was profound

Questioning difficult but question key these assumptions and living a assumptive rather like p

This raises the issue of being aware of While I perceive provides a reminder accepted assumptions in the event of

Lack of sense of

Additionally, particularly in trying own internal really struggle amongst the group own internal management. blame, there a ness, and a curriculum materials was tagged the school structural flaws in it was quite difficult taken for granted institutional did explicitly pay it was how can

the women to challenge unhelpful assumptions about their situations; to challenge those constructions which: portrayed them as powerless and displaced; and, cast them in binary oppositional terms from their management and the school based staff. Yet, at the same time, I was aware of the need to avoid contributing to any further unrest for the school nurses. The difficulty was that questioning, and in effect, destabilizing their stories to develop different formulations, seemed to be potentially quite traumatizing. Whilst initially, I believed the purpose of the critical reflection workshops was educational, and not designed to be therapeutic, on reflection I now recognize this dichotomous construction may have limited my capacity during the workshops to duly acknowledge the emotional nature of the learning, which at times, was profoundly intense. As Brookfield (1990) explains:

Questioning the assumptions on which we act and exploring alternative ideas are not only difficult but also psychologically explosive. ... Beginning to recognize and then critically question key assumptions is like laying down charges of psychological dynamite. When these assumptions explode and we realize that what we thought of as fixed ways of thinking and living are only options among a range of alternatives, the whole structure of our assumptive world crumbles. Hence, educators who foster transformative learning are rather like psychological and cultural demolition experts. (Brookfield, 1990, p. 178)

This raises ethical questions for educators to proceed carefully and sensitively while being aware of the potential risks for participants of engaging in critical reflection. While I perceived there was a culture of collusion and resistance in group, Brookfield provides a reminder that 'in some cultures, people who think critically—who question accepted assumptions—are the first to disappear, to be tortured, or to be murdered in the event of a political coup d'etat' (1990, p. 179).

Lack of sense of agency

Additionally, in trying to foster critical reflection among the participants, and particularly in trying to assist them to situate themselves in, and take responsibility for, their own internal constructions of particular incidents, the school nurses appeared to really struggle with the notion of personal agency. There was a dominant contention amongst the group that accepting any suggestion of personal responsibility for their own internal construction of incidents, scapegoated them and vindicated their management. While responsibility was discussed as agency to change, rather than as blame, there appeared to be almost a complicit embrace of discourses of powerlessness, and a culture within the group that implied that engaging with the workshop materials was tantamount to selling out and colluding with an agenda that disadvantaged the school nurses and held them responsible for what they saw were the structural flaws in the school nurse program. This cultural resistance to critical reflection was quite difficult for me to work with at times, and on reflection, I think I may have taken for granted that they knew that I understood and recognized the structural and institutional dimensions of power that were operating in their experiences, without explicitly paying adequate attention to this with them. My main concern at the time was how can I assist these practitioners to benefit from critical reflection and to

relocate the means of change with them, without getting caught up in individualistic notions of blame? On reflection, I believe this question may have been made more accessible for the school nurses to engage with if we had first discussed the structural and cultural aspects of organizational power in a way that validated their experiences, and their really quite severe feelings of powerlessness.

This question paralleled some of the main themes to emerge from analysis of the incidents presented in the workshops. Without specifically referring to particular incidents discussed by participants, some of the major issues or questions to emerge in discussions with the school nurses during the workshops were:

- How can we prevent being scapegoated by the structural flaws in the school nurse program? How can we respond to our sense of powerlessness?
- How can we dismantle disempowering/oppressive power relations and structures to reconstruct them in more equitable terms?
- What are the 'messages' that prevent us from valuing our work/role? And how can we create alternative discourses to challenge and change these?
- What is good practice? Who decides this? How do we know when our work is good? What are the expectations and boundaries surrounding our role as school nurses?

Some of the broader issues for me personally whilst working with the school nurses during the workshops were also encapsulated in the following questions:

- How can I acknowledge and be validating of people's experiences of victimization and oppression that has been largely caused by external, structural factors which are problematic in their workplaces, while avoiding inadvertently reinforcing their sense of powerlessness?
- And, how can I retain the critical analysis that informs my understanding of their experiences whilst simultaneously assisting the school nurses to reconstruct their identities (through critical reflection) with the agency to respond in a way that challenges and changes dominant, oppressive power structures and relations?

In examining some of these questions, on reflection it appears at times that I may have unconsciously been using a deficits based approach in focusing on what the nurses perceived to be problematic issues that were impacting on their professional practice. While the nurses essentially determined the issues and incidents they chose to bring to the workshops, given their anxieties and reluctance, as a facilitator, it may have been more beneficial to draw on appreciative inquiry to enable the school nurses to identify strengths in their practice and roles first, rather than problems. Another approach may have been to invite the school nurses to share stories about their practice which they felt were successful, rewarding, meaningful and positive. This may have created a much more comfortable group culture, and have been less confronting for the school nurses, whilst still educating the nurses in critical reflection and still enabling the critically reflective aims of the consultancy to be met.

A different cultural

Another issue with workers was the d critical reflection facilitating critical least been exposed can take on partic reasonably confident the content that u values, and an awi faced by marginali duced to postmod I feel confident th

With the schoo underpinned their about the sorts of nurses had difficu identify that their social model of he really seem to be a lated into their pr personal assumpti which is consistent Schön (1976). But when critical pract

I believe one of t their practice mor work classes, stud yet their critical in practice, and the p sense, critical refl congruent with the

While one woul school nurses, duri lenged this assumpt to be continual sex struggled to under during a brief brea the whole group v Melbourne on the her declaration, st provocative manne inviting everyone

A different cultural context among the nurses

Another issue with facilitating critical reflection for school nurses instead of social workers was the difference in the cultural context. Most of my experience in teaching critical reflection has involved working with undergraduate social work students. In facilitating critically reflective learning in this context, I know the students have at least been exposed to critical modernist perspectives. While it is possible that students can take on particular values quite uncritically, or even superficially, I generally feel reasonably confident that they are clear about the importance of critical values and the content that underpin critical frameworks (such as a commitment to social justice values, and an awareness of structural dimensions of oppression and social inequities faced by marginalized groups (Fook, 1993; Mullaly, 1993, 2002) *before* they are introduced to postmodern critiques of the totalizing elements of these theories. Essentially, I feel confident that there is a shared value base between myself and the students.

With the school nurses however, I was unclear about the knowledge base that underpinned their work, and this felt somewhat problematic for me. When asked about the sorts of theoretical frameworks that informed school nursing, the school nurses had difficulty articulating any specific frameworks, choosing more broadly to identify that their work was based on the developmental stages of adolescence and a social model of health. Additionally, I felt some concern that the school nurses didn't really seem to be able to convincingly articulate how these bodies of knowledge translated into their practice. Much description of their practice seemed to be based on personal assumptions and values, rather than being guided by their espoused theories, which is consistent with the gap identified between theory and practice by Argyris and Schön (1976). But how can the critical reflection process make practice more critical when critical practice is not necessarily the goal identified by the group?

I believe one of the main goals of critical reflection is to assist practitioners to bring their practice more in line with their espoused values. In my undergraduate social work classes, students often espouse a commitment to anti-oppressive frameworks, yet their critical incidents might indicate a gap between the values that underpin their practice, and the processes they use to operationalize the values in practice. In this sense, critical reflection can assist students to change their practice to be more congruent with their espoused critical aims (Fook, 2002).

While one would expect such a process would have the same applicability with school nurses, during the workshops some questions were raised for me which challenged this assumption. To provide an example, during the workshops, there seemed to be continual sexual references being made in response to unrelated material, and I struggled to understand this at the time. One of the most striking incidents was that during a brief break in one of the workshops, one participant caught the attention of the whole group when she announced that she had been to the Men's Gallery in Melbourne on the weekend, which is essentially a strip club. Immediately following her declaration, she jumped up on her table and proceeded to dance in quite a provocative manner, proclaiming this is what she had learned on the weekend, and inviting everyone else to join her in her next trip back to Melbourne. I was quite

shocked by this, and I remember thinking, it is all very well to use critical reflection as a tool to enable practitioners to practice more critically so that their practice can equate with their values, but what happens when their values seem really uncritical? I don't want to participate in assisting practitioners to make their practice more congruent with their espoused values, when the values seem highly problematic!

My background is in the field of sexual assault, and the feminist analysis that informs my work in this field rejects any form of sexualization or objectification of women. I personally had a very strong reaction to this woman's behaviour. It quite a critical incident for me! I remember wondering at the time about the appropriateness of referring, as I had been throughout the workshops, to *our* commitment, our analysis, our theory or our practice, when, in this instance, there seemed to be actually no common ground to work from. How can I use critical reflection to assist these practitioners to practice in line with their espoused theories and values when these are so obviously problematic for me and so obviously far removed from critical perspectives and aims?

While consciousness raising has been criticized along with traditional approaches to education for constructing the recipient of knowledge as 'blank slate awaiting political inscription by a politically aware social worker' (Rossiter, 1996, p. 26) at this point during the workshops, I felt traditional, modernist consciousness raising may have been more useful and effective for the school nurses, rather than critical reflection. I felt this particularly as I thought about how this woman might respond in working with young women in the secondary school system around issues for self esteem and body image, for example. While I am aware there are some differences between the school nurse role and that of social work or welfare within the education system, the incidents the school nurses were describing from their practice were very familiar to me as a social worker. I was aware of a rising urgency inside me which would have liked to educate the nurses in some introductory critical theorizing to at least start to bring a structural analysis to their conceptualization of social issues. As Tripp explains:

... we tend to set people up to accept and maintain a view of the world that is based on our own values; and because they are very valuable to us, very naturally we want those whom we teach to make our values their own. (Tripp, 1998, p. 36)

This however, creates a major contradiction. This disparity between the espoused position of critical educator who values the expertise and wisdom of the group (Belenkey *et al.*, 1986) while also feeling highly concerned about the capacity of the group to understand and embrace a critical analysis of social issues, is a dilemma that continues to challenge me. While unequivocally wanting to avoid reproducing any aspect of the traditional banking model of education (Freire, cited in Leonard, 1997), what happens when we encounter a student who is racist or homophobic or a group participant that indulges sexist discourses? How do we remain respectful of the values and experiences of participants, when a critical analysis tells us these values are highly problematic for social work and in general life? How do we balance the conveying of our professional and ethical responsibility to make participants aware of the ways in

which we are all avoiding indoctrination—thus self-reflection', 'claim to a cog reality', I also en

Education is sion—thus self-reflection Horton, 1990

I have critical potentially unc (Morley, 2004; trap of particip these women n 1998; Goodman own practice wi critical and em group and facili was still left in a and with the ac

Theorizing the

Having now had standing or thec ized oppression discussed how n an example of h and low cut top professional cre in such a proces nalize oppressio attempt to reclai that there were these issues that

Additionally, while facilitating nurses had cons asking them to : quite a vulnerat attempt to exerc power, Foucault

which we are all complicit with oppressive and inequitable social arrangements, while avoiding indoctrinating them with critical theory? While desperately wanting to refrain from assuming that people may be operating in what Marx referred to as 'false consciousness', reflecting as Berger states (1975 cited in Goodman, 1998, p. 56) the 'claim to a cognitively privileged status which allows 'intellectuals' to designate reality', I also endorse the acknowledgement that:

Education is never politically neutral. It either offers *reasonable* explanation for oppression—thus serving to maintain the existing social order—or it offers possibilities for critical self-reflection to challenge assumptions underlying those explanations. (Heaney & Horton, 1990, p. 84)

I have critically reflected often on my own practice, and subsequently realize the potentially uncritical limitations of modernist notions of consciousness raising (Morley, 2004; Fook & Morley, 2005), and what the implications are if I fall into the trap of participating in a discourse that suggests that I know what is right and what these women need in terms of theoretical input to be better practitioners (Tripp, 1998; Goodman, 1998). I know that uncritically adopting this approach ensures my own practice will depart from my espoused theoretical and ethical commitment to critical and emancipatory pedagogies, creating equitable power relations within the group and facilitating progressive social change with the participants. Despite this, I was still left in a quandary of discomfort with the complexities of some of these issues, and with the acknowledgement that they remained unresolved.

Theorizing the school nurses responses

Having now had the time to critically reflect, what I have found most useful in understanding or theorizing the behaviour of the school nurses was the notion of internalized oppression (Mullaly, 2002). During the workshops, the school nurses actually discussed how nurses are often inappropriately objectified and sexualized. They gave an example of how at fancy dress parties there are often nurse outfits, with short skirts and low cut tops, and talked about how they perceived this as delegitimizing their professional credibility. At the time, I wondered why they would actively participate in such a process, yet another perspective suggests that people or groups who internalize oppression may actually reproduce the manifestations of the oppressor in an attempt to reclaim power, and control of the discourse (Mullaly, 2002). I can now see that there were perhaps some missed opportunities for further critical reflection on these issues that I neglected to explore at the time.

Additionally, the frequent sexual references, which I saw as quite inappropriate while facilitating the workshops, can also be theorized differently. Given that the nurses had constructed me as being aligned with their management, and that I was asking them to reveal their practice for scrutiny, which essentially renders them in quite a vulnerable position, the use of sexual jokes, and so on, may have been an attempt to exercise power by controlling discourse. As Rees explains, 'the essence of power, Foucault has argued, is to participate in, to influence or even to take control

of discourse' (Rees, 1991, p. 38). On reflection, this may have been an opportunity to talk with the school nurses about the ways in which they can and do exercise power by participating in discourse, and how this could become a more conscious strategy in their practice, rather than just proceeding with the program.

My perception of the school nurses' resistance to participate in the workshops is another issue that I needed to critically reflect on. There are two main issues here. Firstly, the gap in communication indicates that we may need to review the ways that consultancies are actually set up and negotiated with management staff. Given that managers may not always be relied upon to appropriately collaborate with staff, perhaps there might be opportunities to meet with and brief the participants, so that they are meaningfully consulted and informed, prior to the commencement of the workshops. Secondly, I am aware that I constructed the resistance that I felt from the school nurses as a problem, which I needed to address and change, before we could move forward. In looking at other interpretations, in fact I could have named and validated the resistance as a strength of the group, whilst also discussing that it may restrict their learning opportunities. In this way participants are provided with a choice about how they want to use resistance. This is a more respectful approach, which is also significant when modeling appropriate practice is also an important part of the learning.

Conclusions, unresolved issues and dilemmas

Ultimately, the program with the school nurses ended up being a relatively successful consultancy. Evaluations were positive and some of the nurses indicated at least a basic understanding of the purposes and processes of engaging in critical reflection. In contextualizing this feedback, however, I wouldn't necessarily feel confident that the school nurses could repeat the process without the assistance of an external facilitator who is skilled in critical reflection. I also didn't feel confident that the nurses comprehensively understood the theory. I felt that they had gained an understanding of the postmodern principles that critique universal critical theories, but perhaps without a sound understanding of the critical theories. Just as many commentators have leveled concerns at postmodern approaches and the challenge to universal notions of social justice, equity, human rights, and so on (Dixon, 1993; Taylor-Gooby, 1994; McDermott, 1996; MacDonald, 1996), the nurses' use of reflection, without the critical insight may have functioned to be individualistic, apolitical, and used to justify problematic discourses. Some concluding feedback that the nurses wanted me to report to their management was both adversarial and oppositional, and I had a sense that they thought they could use the process as an inappropriate exercise of power in an attempt to invert the hierarchy and bolster their positions, rather than reconstruct power relations for more equitable interactions (Healy, 2000; Fook, 2002). In this sense, I felt that they might have an understanding of the critically reflective process, but not necessarily of the purpose and critical aims. This also raises another dilemma for me in terms of evaluation: How do we reconcile the disparity between our own perceptions as facilitators, of what the participants have learnt, and

their perception offering similar achieve their aim of workplace supporting.

In conclusion, educational practice. In analyzing this best practice, but tive factors, and tive process. In own cross discipl number of quest dilemmas inhere parallel some of critical with the p for social work a

Notes on Contributors

Christine Morley

References

- Allan, J. Pease, B. *practices* (Crow
- Argyris, C. & Schön, D. (1978) *Organizational Learning* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass)
- Belenky, M. F. (1986) *Women's Ways of Knowing: the development of self, mind and voice* (New York, Basic Books)
- Brookfield, S. (1996) *Developing a Critical Mind* (Ed.) *Fostering Critical Thinking in the Classroom* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass)
- Clift, E. (2005) *Workplace Learning* (New York, Routledge)
- Dixon, J. (1993) *Postmodernism and the Challenge to Universal Notions of Social Justice, Equity, Human Rights, and so on* (Dixon, 1993; Taylor-Gooby, 1994; McDermott, 1996; MacDonald, 1996), the nurses' use of reflection, without the critical insight may have functioned to be individualistic, apolitical, and used to justify problematic discourses. Some concluding feedback that the nurses wanted me to report to their management was both adversarial and oppositional, and I had a sense that they thought they could use the process as an inappropriate exercise of power in an attempt to invert the hierarchy and bolster their positions, rather than reconstruct power relations for more equitable interactions (Healy, 2000; Fook, 2002). In this sense, I felt that they might have an understanding of the critically reflective process, but not necessarily of the purpose and critical aims. This also raises another dilemma for me in terms of evaluation: How do we reconcile the disparity between our own perceptions as facilitators, of what the participants have learnt, and
- Dominelli, L. (2000) *Work Education* (New York, Routledge)
- Dore, M. (1994) *Work Education* (New York, Routledge)
- Fook, J. (1993) *Racism and the Workplace* (New York, Routledge)
- Fook, J. (1996) *The Unwilling* (New York, Routledge)
- Fook, J. (2002) *Critical Reflection* (New York, Routledge)
- Fook, J. (2004) *Critical Reflection* (Eds) *Social Work and Critical Reflection* (New York, Routledge)
- Fook, J. & Morley, C. (2005) *Workplace Learning* (New York, Routledge)
- Pozzuto, J. (Eds) *Workplace Learning* (New York, Routledge)

their perception of their learning? The other issue it raises is the need to consider offering similar workshops to the school nurses' managers. If the workshops did achieve their aims, there are implications for organizational change and transformation of workplace culture, which the managers need to understand and be involved in supporting.

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted some of the issues that emerged from my educative practice in attempting to engage practitioners in critically reflective learning. In analyzing this work, it has not been my intention to point to suggestions regarding best practice, but rather to highlight the complex interplay of structural and interpretive factors, and interpersonal dynamics, which shape and inform the critically reflective process. In reflecting on the experience of using critical reflection to assist on my own cross disciplinary teaching practice of critical reflection, I have asked myself a number of questions. It is my belief that these questions not only capture some of the dilemmas inherent in my experiences of teaching critical reflection to, but arguably parallel some of the delicate and complex theoretical tensions between blending the critical with the postmodern, which continues to be an ongoing challenge and journey for social work and other disciplines.

Notes on Contributor

Christine Morley lectures in social work at Deakin University in Australia.

References

- Allan, J. Pease, B. & Briskman, L. (Eds) (2003) *Critical social work: an introduction to theories and practices* (Crows Nest, NSW, Allen & Unwin).
- Argyris, C. & Schön, D. (1976) *Theory in practice: increasing professional effectiveness* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).
- Belenkey, M. F. Clinchy, B. M. Goldberger, N. R. & Tarule, J. M. (1986) *Women's ways of knowing: the development of self, voice and mind* (New York, Basic Books).
- Brookfield, S. (1990) Using critical incidents to explore learners' assumptions, in: J. Mezirow (Ed.) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass), 177–193.
- Clift, E. (2005) *Women, philanthropy and social change: visions for a just society* (Hanover, University Press of New England).
- Dixon, J. (1993) Feminist community work's ambivalence with politics, *Australian Social Work*, 46(1), 37–44.
- Dominelli, L. (2002) *Feminist social work theory and practice* (Basingstroke, Palgrave).
- Dore, M. (1994) Feminist pedagogy and the teaching of social work practice, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 30(1), 97–106.
- Fook, J. (1993) *Radical casework* (St Leonards, Allen & Unwin).
- Fook, J. (1996) *The Reflective researcher: social workers' theories of practice research* (Sydney, Allen & Unwin).
- Fook, J. (2002) *Critical social work* (London, Sage).
- Fook, J. (2004) Critical reflection and transformative possibilities, in: L. Davies & P. Leonard (Eds) *Social work in a corporate era: practices of power and resistance* (Ashgate, Avebury), 16–30.
- Fook, J. & Morley, C. (2005) Empowerment: a contextual perspective, in: S. Hick, J. Fook & R. Pozzuto (Eds) *Social work: a critical turn* (Toronto, Thompson Education Publishing), 67–86.

- Goodman, J. (1998) Ideology and critical ethnography, in: J. Smyth & G. Shacklock (Eds) *Being reflexive and critical in educational and social research* (London, Falmer Press).
- Healy, K. (2000) *Social work practices: contemporary perspectives on change* (London, Sage).
- Heaney, T. W. & Horton, A. I. (1990) Reflective engagement for social change, in: J. Mezirow (Ed.) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass), 74–98.
- Hick, S. Fook, J. & Pozzuto, R. (2005) *Social work: a critical turn* (Toronto, Thompson).
- Ife, J. (1997) *Rethinking social work: towards critical practice* (Melbourne, Longman).
- Ife, J. (2000) *Human rights in social work: towards rights based practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Jones, M. (1993) Reflective practice and learning: an education program for school nurses. Unpublished paper, Deakin University, Geelong.
- Leonard, P. (1997) *Postmodern welfare: reconstructing the emancipatory project* (London, Sage).
- McDermott, F. (1996) Social work research: debating the boundaries, *Australian Social Work*, 49(1), 5–10.
- MacDonald, L. (1996) Dismantling the movement: feminist, postmodernism and politics, *Refractory Girl*, 50, 48–51.
- Marchant, H. & Wearing, B. (Eds) (1986) *Gender reclaimed: women in social work* (Sydney, Hale & Iremonger).
- Mezirow, J. (1990) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).
- Moreau, M. (1979) A structural approach to social work practice, *Canadian Journal of Social Work Education*, 5(1), 78–93.
- Morley, C. (2004) Critical reflection as a response to globalization?, *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 13(2), 297–303.
- Mullaly, B. (1993) *Structural social work: ideology, theory and practice* (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, Inc.).
- Mullaly, B. (2002) *Challenging oppression: a critical social work approach* (Ontario, Oxford University Press).
- Orlie, M. (1997) *Living ethically, acting politically* (New York, Cornell University Press).
- Pease, B. & Fook, J. (Eds) (1999) *Transforming Social work practice: postmodern critical perspectives* (St Leonards, Allen & Unwin).
- Rees, S. (1993) *Achieving power* (Sydney, Allen & Unwin).
- Rossiter, A. B. (1996) A perspective on critical social work, *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 7(2), 23–41.
- Rossiter, A. (2001) Innocence lost and suspicion found: do we education for or against social work?, *Critical Social Work*, 2(1), 1–9.
- Sands, R. G. (1996) The elusiveness of identity in social work practice with women: a postmodern feminist perspective, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 24(2), 167–186.
- Schön, D. (1983) *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action* (New York, Basic Books).
- Taylor-Gooby, P. (1994) Postmodernism and social polity: a great leap backwards?, *Journal of Social Policy*, 23(3), 385–404.
- Tripp, D. (1998) Critical incidents in action inquiry in ethnography, in: J. Smyth & G. Shacklock (Eds) *Being reflexive and critical in educational and social research* (London, Falmer Press).
- Van Den Bergh, N. & Cooper, L. B. (Eds) (1986) *Feminist visions for social work* (Silver Spring, National Association of Social Workers).

This paper
professional
practicing p
by physician
and engage
followed by
participants
professional
thematic an
Nine are di
of the proce
'learning fr
findings in
discussed ir
tion. Insight

Study co

Schön's (across dis
approache
profession
study shift
profession

Within
aimed at
medical s
both with
communi

*Correspon
AB, Canada

ISSN 1462
© 2007 Tay
DOI: 10.10