

Does the Adoption of an In-Depth Questioning Approach Promote Self-Reflexivity? Its Application to the Social Work Education Context.

Damian Spiteri, Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology

1 Introduction

This study explores whether undergraduate social work students at the University of Malta view the 'practice workshop' modules, that they undertake as part of their prescribed course work, as assisting them to be more self-reflexive and more aware of the impact that they are having on other people and that other people are having on them. Self-reflexivity is seen as the backbone of effective social work practice since it enables social work practitioners to adopt an objective stance during interpersonal interactions (Parker, 2010; Parker and Bradley, 2010). This study expands upon existing social work literature by looking at how the in-depth questioning adopted during practice workshop sessions contributes to social work education by means of promoting a better informed practice.

2 What are practice workshops?

At the University of Malta, an emphasis is made on social work training to balance between presenting students with skills and knowledge to become effective practitioners, and enabling them to practise those skills in various agencies whilst on placement. Practice workshops have been developed to bridge the divide between the two. They approach this principally by engaging students in thinking about how what they learn at university is applicable in social work agencies both during their placements and eventually as qualified practitioners.

Social work has been offered at the University of Malta for the past three and a half decades. Prior to that, any Maltese people aspiring to become social workers would have had to study abroad, more often than not going to other parts of the English-speaking world, particularly the UK. Social work training in Malta was firstly offered at the University at diploma level in the late 1980s. Then, in the 1990s, it started being offered at degree level, with the diploma being phased out. Since its onset, the training offered has involved a balance of subjects from different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and social policy besides social work. In terms of staffing arrangements, lectures to students of social work have been always offered by personnel from different disciplines and faculties. Originally, there were only two core staff members who qualified and fully-fledged social workers who lectured on the course, even though, over the years, the staff complement of social workers has increased. The first social work courses were offered by the Faculty of Arts and were offered to students who were reading for a Bachelor's (undergraduate) degree in psychology and sociology. The same undergraduate degree programme was then transferred to the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy. It is only recently that undergraduate training in social work at the University of Malta has come to be offered by the Faculty of Social Wellbeing which is a newly established faculty.

Practice workshops have been offered to social work students since the social work course began in the 1980s. Originally, it may be assumed safely that they served the undocumented

purpose of enriching the social work dimension of the course since they served as a way of ascertaining that theoretical knowledge that was presented to students from professionals in other disciplines could be applied by social work students in social work contexts. As the complement of social workers lecturing on the course increased, and consequently the 'social-work informed input' to the course was also increased, this (attributed) function of practice workshops, however, became increasingly redundant. Emphasis was laid progressively on providing social work students with a context where they could engage in discussion and active dialogue about set topics, where they could explore their understanding of given situations, and where they could discover what that particular manner of understanding those situations says about them. In this respect, the workshops can be said to have developed to the stage where they respond to the widespread and strong need that is experienced in professional education and among practitioners, namely the need for discourses of and on 'reflective practice' and 'critical reflection' (Fook, 1996; Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 1997; Taylor, 1996; Spiteri, 2009; Spiteri, 2010b). They thereby serve the function of discouraging the students from engaging in 'blind functioning' and 'falling into routines' in their respective organisational settings particularly during their placements, whilst aiming to offer students a down-to-earth approach to making practices of critical professional reflection visible. As Naudi (2006) points out, when writing about social work practice in Malta, even though social work is located within different social and cultural socio-scapes, "many of these arrangements, understandings or knowledges are part of the taken-for granted background and hence practitioners may not be self-consciously aware of them" (p. 118). Without such an awareness, a desire for transformative action cannot come emerge as social workers would not be trained to become 'agents of change' but rather passively reinforce the status quo (Fook, 2002).

One of the most fundamental tenets on which practice workshops are based, is that of engaging the students in regularly asking questions that start with what, how, why, for whom, to whom, where and when. This questioning attitude is reinforced by the lecturer's approach. The lecturer facilitates rather than 'instructs.' This is similar to the approach adopted in problem-based learning (PBL) strategies (Lam, 2009; Wong and Lam, 2007). The lecturer's role in PBL sessions is that of ensuring that an appropriate learning environment is provided, of utilizing authentic practice situations and offering support without taking over the group. Through asking questions that start out in the manner stated above, the students would challenge amongst themselves any overly simplistic examples that they may raise, even though they may not be presented with a progressive case that develops from one session to another as is conventionally done in PBL sessions. The questioning approach can also engage students in making valid distinctions and connections about what is being explored, generating alternative points of view, building logically on each other's contributions, exploring any underlying values, beliefs and interpretations that they detect, and offering clarifications whenever necessary. As in PBL sessions, during the practice workshop sessions, this implies that students have access to opportunities for the development of metacognitive skills and awareness, stemming from self-observation and self-monitoring, and this offers a pedagogical utility within the overall context of student learning. Since such workshops assume a basic knowledge of social work, they are currently carried out in the second and third years of the four year social work degree course (offered at the University of Malta). The first two units of this workshop series are attended by students who are in their second year of studies. The last unit is offered when they are in their third year.

Certain universities also offer seminars as an adjunct to lectures and PBL sessions. Generally, these follow on after a lecture and take on board a relatively larger number of students, sometimes as much as half of those attending for lectures. Within a seminar, it is unnecessary to adopt a circular seating arrangement, since the lecturer has a responsibility to promote the study of the lecture's constitutive elements and processes that the coordinating team believes to be more important to develop the students' comprehension and mastery of the material at hand. Within practice workshops, students are rarely grouped into more than eight to ten students per group, in acknowledgement that the interaction between them is cardinal for their effective running. During practice workshops, students are presented with set tasks by their lecturer who sits within the circle and they are regularly invited to make some of their experiences during practice placements visible and to offer them for the workshop discourse. The workshops are not timetabled to coincide with lectures but rather are timed in such a way that they immediately precede (or to coincide with) the start of the students' placements. The only exception to this is the observation (or engagement) placement which is offered in the students' first year of studies. It is timetabled to coincide with two modules in Helping Skills that follow on after each other. (In many ways, Helping Skills serves as a preparation for the practice workshop series and is mainly focused on introducing the students to basic social work skills in such areas as communication and counselling. The topics covered during the three units of practice workshops build upon what the students cover in Helping Skills). Furthermore, unlike the seminar format described above, the practice workshops are not normally based on exploring the material covered in any lecture or series of lectures in particular but rather serve to 'blend' the knowledge acquired from different course modules without focusing on any one in particular. They cover topics that include human development, needs, value clarification, self-awareness, the social work process, social networking and social capital formation, community appraisals, and counseling skills including challenging, confronting, and advanced empathy.

A typical practice workshop session can be mainly subdivided into three parts, even though the sequential organisation of certain workshops may sometimes differ. This would depend on the topic on which the workshop is principally focused. In the *first part* students are presented with an 'ice-breaker exercise' where they are invited to reflect on a certain aspect of the topic in hand. Thus, if discussing assertiveness, students would be invited to think of a well-known personality with an assertive look or attitude and explore why they think the person they selected manifests assertiveness. They would then relate that data to themselves, thinking for instance when they acted assertively or when they portrayed an assertive attitude and exploring what influence they thought that this had on others. Likewise, if discussing ecomaps, students would be asked to think of a symbol that says something about their family and explain why they chose it. In the *second part* of the practice workshop students are presented with pertinent case related material which they are then asked to discuss in dyads and relate to their own lives. Therefore, if discussing assertiveness, they would not only be expected to familiarize themselves with what assertiveness is and why it is an important skill for social work practitioners, but also how they applied (or failed to apply) that skill in their daily lives and in placement contexts. Similarly, if they are asked to draw an eco-map wherein they illustrate their relationship with meaningful people and things in their lives, they do not only explore why the eco-map has a useful function in effective social work practice, but they also draw an ecomap of their own and discuss its applicability in their daily lives. They would also draw another ecomap by pretending to be one of their clients and have the other student asking them for relevant material. Through this role-play, they would familiarize themselves further with the difficulties and strengths of using this tool, besides offering them exposure to

this procedure in a lecture-room setting, as opposed to using it for the first time, directly with clients, whilst on placement. In the *third part*, the students are then invited to share any pertinent reflections with the whole group. Normally, in this part of the workshop, students would share together overall learning points and respond to the feedback they would have been given one another in a general way. This part of the workshop also has a motivational dimension to it since it promotes self-efficacy as a result of the realisation that they share both certain competencies and certain fears with others.

All the workshops share a common emphasis on discussion, the asking of questions, and reflection. They are carried out in a down-to-earth way and as a result of this offer them a practical context wherein students can further develop their soft skills (including for instance, communication skills, active listening, emotion management, empathy, problem-solving and decision-making skills). All of these skills are cardinal to effective social work practice, most especially considering that social workers operate both, individually and as part of various teams, some of which, furthermore, may have a multi-disciplinary composition. As a further plus-point, successful acquisition of these soft skills have been associated with heightened emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996) and with adaptive coping and interpersonal success in the workplace and in other domains (George, 2000; Howe, 2008; Carmelli and Josman, 2006).

Between one practice workshop session and another, students are asked to write out a reflective journal. In this journal, students write up their reflections on the (previous) workshop they attended. The students are then given detailed feedback on their write-up by the lecturer. The students are never pressured into using abstract jargon or to show their mastery of relevant social work literature in recognition that this would make it difficult for them to write about and communicate their experiences of the issues, problems and puzzles that they encounter in a straightforward and non-defensive manner. The workshops and reflective journal, when taken together, serve as a medium for the promoting of both "learning-in-action" - the learning derived from the ongoing discussions while the workshops are taking place; and "learning-on-action" - the learning derived from when students write up their journals and reflect upon the self-knowledge and self-reflexivity that the workshops promoted (Boud and Knights, 1996, p. 27). This complementary process enables the students to participate in "a continuous spiral of personal transformation" (Vachon, Durand & LeBlanc, 2009, p.330) since students learn to look at realities differently and from different view-points. This, in turn, infers that while interacting with clients, there would be a lesser chance that they would impose their own view-point as a type of master narrative which subjugates clients' points of view (Naudi, 2006). Conversely, through being aware of the different voices that present themselves, and by distinguishing between their own view and that of their clients, they are more likely to have cognitive and emotional awareness, that is associated with empathic experiences and thereby with giving accurate empathic responses to the clients. This level of awareness is also associated with heightened reasonableness (Kennedy, 1994) since it evidences the emotional maturity and emotional intelligence that is associated inherently with a widening of their repertoire of perspectives.

3 Methodology

The research strategy adopted consisted of (i) participant observation (which thereby took place while the practice workshops were being conducted) and (ii) the moderation of a focus group. Participant observation took place when the lecturer, as the author of this paper, facilitated the practice workshop sessions during the third round of practice workshops

(practice workshops III). These workshops took place in 2009 and 2010. Each of the practice workshop modules (I, II, and III) consisted of thirteen sessions.

The focus group took place two months after the whole series of practice workshops sessions ended, when the students were approaching the end of their placement, and when they had already been presented with the results of the unit. The researcher obtained the informed consent of all the participants individually in order to collect the data associated with this study. (None of the information that was obtained from either the practice workshops or the journal were directly employed in the study. This is because it would have been impossible to discern if the students would have preferred that something would not be mentioned in a published work. For this reason, the researcher decided to 'play safe' and only use information derived from them indirectly. A case in point was, when the researcher explored with the students, if there were situations where they found it more difficult to be assertive than others. This exploration had been triggered since some of them had written in their log-books that they found it difficult to be assertive at home, and it was thereby deemed necessary to explore whether the workshops had stimulated them to reflect on their relationship with authority figures). Data for this article was drawn mainly from the students' exploration of the challenges they faced during the workshops, how they applied what they had learnt to their placements, what they perceived as most helpful to them in terms of personal growth, and whether they felt they had greater self-reflexivity as a result of their participation in the workshops. The focus group was attended by six students who were from different groups who had just terminated the practice workshops III series. They were selected randomly from a list of all the students attending. The two young men who attended have been assigned the (fictitious) names Jake and Mark while the remaining four women have been assigned the names of Martha, Eileen, Maria and Phoebe. It was recorded and the data that was derived from it was subsequently transcribed. This manner of recording the sessions was in contrast to the procedure adopted when taking notes of student interactions during the practice workshop sessions and when eliciting salient data from the journals, which were in any case, seen as complementary to the data acquisition extrapolated from the focus-group on which this study is mainly based. (During the practice workshops the lecturer took down notes in as unobtrusive a manner as possible particularly while the students were attending to tasks that were set while the workshops were being conducted so as not to obstruct or in any way influence the interactions that were taking place as far as possible. The journals were photocopied after he had written his feedback on them prior to presenting them to the students). Focus groups have come to be viewed as a valid research tool for empirical research precisely because they lend themselves to a flexible approach that stems from the combined inputs of a number of people rather than simply the researcher asking questions in a uni-directional manner (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).

The triangulated approach of participant observation and focus groups subscribes to a qualitative phenomenological approach. This approach bases itself upon a researcher's engagement in an accurate understanding of people's lived experiences and their ability to depict reality "from the perspectives of (the) people involved" (Welman and Kruger, 1999, p. 189). Consistent with this is the process of bracketing. This involves the setting aside of any preconceived notions (or anything outside the actual and immediate experience) of the phenomenon under investigation by researchers (Eagleton, 1983). Bracketing has been applied through the study's focus on the intersubjective aspect of the relationships formed within the practice workshops sessions. These relationships were forged between the lecturer and the students (when facilitating and simultaneously researching the practice workshop III

sessions) and also between the students amongst themselves. Consequently it was decided that for data analysis purposes a three-step coding procedure that recognizes that the research is not only shaped by the subjective world of the participants but also the interpretations that are made by the researcher (Tolman and Brydon-Miller, 2001) would be used. This procedure involved the use of open, axial and selective coding as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Open coding was carried out by breaking down the data into distinct themes. These were: student-centered learning, respect, trust, questions, understanding, care, dialogue, student voice, and discussion. Next axial coding was carried out, whereby the above mentioned themes were grouped into conceptual categories in such a way as to deepen the theoretical framework emerging from the data analysis that was taking place. The axial codes that were nominated were developing an effective practice and asking in-depth questions. Both these aspects of learning were strongly interwoven with the concept of self-reflexivity since they involved exploring how the students' words and actions had the potential to influence others, and how the words and actions of others had the potential to influence them, both, in the context of their practice workshop sessions and in the context of a wider social work practice. This serves to augment the notion that developing skills and dispositions associated with critical thinking is conducive to generating social work knowledge and competency (Spiteri 2010a). At the final selective coding level of analysis wherein researchers integrate the categories that they have proposed in order to form a theoretical structure of the analysis, the notion of the importance of eliciting student voice in creating an active learning environment that is conducive to the development of both self-reflexivity and tools of inquiry was what was accentuated. The following section will highlight how the students described student voice and how it permeated their discussion during their practice workshop sessions. The notion of incorporating student voice in teaching or lecturing is not new to either social work training (Coleman, Collins & Bayliss, 2007) or to further or higher education in general (Spiteri, 2009; Wong and Lam, 2007). What is certain is, that there needs to be genuine engagement as well as a certain degree of mutuality, openness, and transparency on the part of all present in such a pedagogic arrangement, since its is based on trust. This study shows that it is only if an appropriate emotional climate is created and maintained, that the expressing and the understanding of the uniqueness of the individual and of his/her subjective experience can be fully respected.

4 Results

The students saw practice workshops as offering them a medium through which they could engage in critical reflection. They saw them as a place where they could find 'space' to discuss issues in a manner that they could not normally do during their lectures. They appreciated that they invested time, effort and energy to express their own view-points and opinions, to listen to those of others and, then to also bring further arguments to change, modify, or further consolidate their original position. They also noted, how consequently practice workshops served to instigate them to look at realities differently. They explained this by referring to other lectures. They said that during these lectures, even though they were often encouraged to think critically about the subject being discussed (by, for example, presenting arguments and critiques during assignments), during practice workshops this focus was broadened considerably. They said that this came about since they had greater opportunity to ask why things were the way they were and to adopt an inquiring outlook that stemmed from the dialogue that they generated amongst themselves.

They explained that since they were studying social work, the effective practice of which depended on their ability to establish meaningful and purposeful interpersonal relationships, they saw themselves as being helped along by the lecturer's practical examples and illustrations, and modeling a questioning disposition to these, as the workshops developed. Aligned to this, Jack noted that "the success of the workshop depends on how much all of us, including the lecturer, puts into it". He added further, so as to clarify (and emphasize) what he was saying, that "like everything else in life, the more we put into something, the more we get out of it – it is the same thing when it comes to understanding others. This is after all what we are training ourselves to do during practice workshops." Martha also laid emphasis on the role of practice workshops in helping students develop insightful awareness about other people's realities. She noted that she "needed to ask other students questions in order to understand what it may feel like to be a client". Her emphasis on asking questions rather than providing answers may reflect an attempt to set aside individual biases and beliefs in order to avoid imposing one's own assumptions onto the life experiences of another person. This is most especially since, as Walsh (2008) points out, people may find it extremely difficult to suspend their internal frame of reference in order to understand another person most especially if that person's underlying beliefs, habits or practices are discordant with one's own.

Other students pointed out that the training extended to them during practice workshops also enabled them to familiarize themselves with other people's points of view in other ways. Phoebe explained that, "practice workshops provides us, as students, with a context where we can prepare for our placements as we can see what our practice is like from a different viewpoint than we would be able to do otherwise. It is not as much about practising skills as it is about understanding that experiences, particularly our experiences, can be seen in many different ways. Understanding others is an off-shoot of all of this." Martha further pointed out that "unless we are present - psychologically, emotionally, and even spiritually - how can people feel they are special enough to want to change. And if we do not believe that people can change, what are we all doing here? We must be in a process of constant discovery with them, and with ourselves, even here and now." It is evident that Martha is perceiving practice workshops III as a forum where participants feel encouraged to engage in active dialogue which complements their aspiration to be 'more present.'

The dialogue that the students engage in during practice workshops is not thereby focused on the resolution of problems and issues at all costs, but rather on the creation of a discussion that is respectful of all who are present. In other words, practice workshops provide a context where nobody's voice is discounted and everyone's viewpoint is attributed its merited attention. This is in many ways conducive with the generating of caring, creative and critical thinking during dialogue that is traceable to literature stemming from the Philosophy for Children tradition (Gregory, 2002, 2007; Kennedy, 1994, 1999; Lipman, 1997, 2001, 2003; Murriss, 2000; Splitter and Sharp, 1995; Spiteri, 2009). The Philosophy for Children approach is based upon participants forming themselves into what is called a community of inquiry. This is called 'a community' since it is characterized by a coming-to-presence of the other. Stated otherwise, it is a context where individuals can experience their own selfhood as separate and distinct from that of others, and yet also experience the self as other in a deeply empathic way, a process that Kennedy (1999, p. 340) refers to as self-othering. This can be explained by means of an illustration whereby an old man goes into a supermarket with his three year old grandson. The grandfather does not realize what his grandchild is imagining the supermarket to be like until he drops something on the floor. At that point, he looks upwards at the supermarket shelves rather than looking at them downwards or at eye-level (as he

would, naturally, as a relatively taller adult). His perspective inevitably changes. This is then likened to a community of inquiry, and the fact that within this community "it is only when members are able and willing to reconstruct subjectivities differently that, consequently, changed perceptions and meanings that reflect the world as seen, experienced and lived by others, can result" (Spiteri, 2010a, p. 95-96). Due to the consequent expanded awareness and sense of mutuality that is promoted during practice workshops, the participants are in a better position to feel more inclined to integrate the different affective and cognitive aspects of their interactions with others.

When exploring which aspect of the practice workshops the participants saw as particularly striking, they asserted that this was the different ways in which they could integrate different parts of effective social work practice into one holistic whole. However, this 'whole' made sense to them at a given moment in time and thereby may make sense differently, if at all, at another time. They said that what they had discussed and discovered during practice workshops made them increasingly conscious that few things in social work practice can be 'definitely concluded.' This also applies to their discussions in class, whereby they observed that they almost always presented things in such a way as if they merited further discussion and reflection. They said that they believed that practice workshops offered them an opportunity to make their voices heard by one another and this increased their sense of agency. Jake elaborated upon this by saying "I think it was more the questions that we asked than the answers we gave which were important. Each question we asked could have been easily answered in so many different ways... we would probably also have answered each question differently depending on where we are in life. As it was, the questions we asked served as a spring-board to asking further questions that made sense to us. The questions were as much about us as they were about what we were asking."

In common with a community of inquiry, the emphasis here, rather than being on problem resolution, is on engagement in a "cooperative search for understanding" (Fischer, 1998, p.81). Naturally, this ongoing search can take place because "whatever question is offered, it is likely to lead to further questions and responses,...rather than a point of absolute closure" (Splitter and Sharp, 1995, p. 49). Jake's reference to the questions coming to be changed depending on where the participants "are in life" further reinforces this point since it is almost inevitable that, at least in some ways, people's perspectives can and do change over time and in different contexts. Based on this premiss, life experience thereby has a major part to play in how in-depth questioning is carried out during practice workshops. This also means that, on placement, they would have acquired a broader repertoire of insights with which to perceive and interpret clients' narratives. They could then use these insights to develop competencies that are derived from a holistic body of knowledge that they have played a part in generating.

Another skill that the participants developed was their ability to listen actively. This became increasingly evident from the lecturer's observations of their sessions wherein he could readily see, for instance, that they do not simply state what they had in mind, in the process failing to acknowledge what the other was saying. An illustration of poor listening, in the context of a lecture, could arise when, during brainstorming exercises, a number of the students present produce the same prompt without realising. They would have failed to pay adequate attention to what the other was saying. This is in contrast to something which 'flows' – where one thing leads to the other. Dialogue, which is based on such a 'flow', emerged during the practice workshop sessions when participants summarized what was said previously before putting forward their own contribution. Also, the participants did not rush in to offer responses but took time to reflect and to allow time for exploration of what each was saying. Moreover,

none of the participants attempted to offer advice, which might imply that the person who was advising the other thought that he has a monopoly on knowledge or truth (which might come about since he or she was the person providing the answers). Consistent with this, the participants stayed clear of logo-centrism which is defined as dedication to a single interpretation that is constructed as the "one and only truth" (Weiss-Gal, 2009, p.880). Further evidence of this was presented during the focus group in the following reference to the teaching approach used.

Jake: "Considering that I had failed helping skills and I have not yet started my placement, the question I would like to ask is: is how we perform on placement only influenced by what we are taught or also by the manner in which we are taught what we are taught. So far, I have blamed myself for failing helping skills. Could I have been trained in helping skills in a different way?"

Mark: "I would say that there are two issues here. Firstly, there is the issue that the approach used by lecturers in preparation for the placements and the material they cover translates itself into how we, as students, perform on placement. Secondly, there is the issue whether helping skills could have somehow been lectured in a different way. Which one shall we focus on?"

Here, there is a clear illustration of the coming together of questioning and dialogue through the particular discursive approach adopted. Jake is considering different dimensions that impinge on his assessment and these are being acknowledged in a concrete manner by Mark. There is nothing superficial in Mark's reply. Nor is there anything in what Mark is saying that detracts from the tension and complexity of Jake's questions. Mark is not attempting to 'take over' the situation, but rather is 'sharing' with the rest of the group. In doing so, he is thereby cementing the idea that the individual's problem is the group's problem and it would be the group which would either decide whether to increase its complexity by introducing other perspectives to Jake's premisses and questions; or else to suggest ways in which this tension could be narrowed down (such as suggesting a tentative hypothesis that could then be explored further). Jake's looking to the group to help him explore internally his failing a module so as to arrive at a changed perspective and thereby perceive this experience in a different way is self-reflexive. It is also likely to promote self-transformation. This type of self-reflexivity cannot be divorced from critical thinking since it is based on the generation of new knowledge that is either adapted to the participants' personal situations and circumstances as students or to practice-contexts including their placements.

5 Conclusion

This paper directs attention to the fact that social work courses need to be adaptable and not only serve instructional functions about the goals, purposes, concepts, policies and orientations that direct how social work is carried out. It also shows that there needs to be time dedicated for students to experiment with, research and reflect on new models in which they may apply themselves and their skills and knowledge to social work practice. While it might be argued that post-qualifying continuous professional development may serve to instigate practitioners to remain updated about certain areas of practice, at least those that are mostly relevant to them, this study brings forward a recommendation that is made by social work students that the abstract-analytical aspects of social work that are taught in university courses need to be complemented by what Weiss-Gal (2009) calls the expression of "alternative understandings" (p. 881). The University of Malta, in offering the students a series of workshops in the module called practice workshops, promotes this complementarity by providing students with a space where essentially they sit down together, discuss and ask

one another questions about a pre-set topic which is of relevance. While the students are required to carry out certain tasks, the tasks in themselves are a spring-board for the students' critical reflection that they are intended to invoke.

Despite this, while in-depth questioning approaches promote students' knowledge as a result of the more insightful dialogue that they tend to bring about, Wong and Lam (2007) express concern about using approaches where, because of a lack of adequate direction by their lecturers, students feel left in the dark as to whether they covered all the course material, and/or whether they have achieved the desired outcomes or learning objectives. They note that since students are still developing their theoretical knowledge, it is possible that unless they are effectively facilitated by a course tutor or a lecturer, they could find themselves feeling increasingly anxious about whether they have inadvertently omitted an 'important' theory, which might imply that their overall assessment would be influenced negatively. However, even so, this needs to be balanced against such positive factors, pertaining to groups characterized by dialogic enquiry, as students being invited to explore together the development of thinking in the light of their life experiences, acquiring greater awareness of the influences and consequences relating to remaining loyal to a particular point of view, formulating questions, formulating hypothesis, using logical criteria on which to build or back a particular argument or line of thought and widening one's awareness of the different aspects that may come to impinge on a given situation (Camhy and Untermoser, 2004). Above all, participants thereby would be manifesting autonomy through thinking for themselves. This would assist them to take reasoned decisions when practising as social workers since they would be likely to apply their self-reflexivity to the different situations that they encounter. This shows precisely how indispensable creating an adequate discursive context is in the training of social workers.

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Author's Address:

Dr. Damian Spiteri
Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology
Triq Kordin, Paola PLA 9032
Malta
Email: damianspiteri@yahoo.co.uk