

Reflective practice

SIGNPOSTS

INTRODUCTION

The journey from Observation to Action is often made quickly, instinctively and - more riskily - often without reflection. *Signposts* is a way of slowing down that journey, to inspect the component parts and to reflect on these. You can focus in more detail on any one aspect - for example, to consider how research-minded the practice is.

Purpose

This chapter is designed to help students to reflect on the way they 'put their practice together' and to dispel the mystique associated with research and 'putting theory into practice'. It scrutinizes the processes which affect the practitioner's judgment in turning observations into action. Formal research is only one of these many processes, and it is likely to take a junior role compared to action based on the observer's past observations, feelings, value base, and so on.

The meeting point of research and practice is one of the most fraught locations on the social work map. All too often, practitioners' complaints that research findings never tell them what they do not already know are matched by researchers' criticisms that practice is based on professional folk lore. The chapter aims to put research on the student's map by helping students consider how they theorise from their own practice experiences.

Method

Both you and the student should consider (independently) one specific observation which you made during a mutual contact with a client. This need not be the one which you thought was the most striking, but it should be one which influenced your subsequent action. It should be a very specific observation.

Make notes around the eight panels signposted as leading from Observation to Action in the *Signposts* activity. Comments should be brief and specific to the one observation which you are focusing on. End with the specific Action taken.

When you have completed the exercise compare notes. This kind of scrutiny enables you both to reflect on factors which influenced your actions which you were not necessarily aware of at the time. You can focus on particular panels, e.g. the Values panel, or the Research panel - how prominent was it? At what stage in the process did it have an impact, if at all?

Variations

The journey from Observation to Action is not as linear as *Signposts*. For the purposes of the activity, the eight processes headlined in *Signposts* are shown as following one from the other, but the journey itself is made in a much more circuitous way, revisiting some stages and probably neglecting some of the others.

It is not possible to subject every action to this kind of detailed scrutiny, but if students can do this exercise a few times, they become aware of their own 'profile'. This helps them to develop their capacities as reflective practitioners and to develop a practice base which is research-minded.

The student who struggles with this activity might benefit from discussing the illustration in *New Social Work Practice*, but it is better not to begin with an example, because this taints the student's responses.

Reflective practice SIGNPOSTS Activity

'Practice theories are an assemblage of signposts which social workers have accumulated in the course of their work. These signposts are made up of a combination of explicit theoretical knowledge, practice wisdom, experience, feelings and observations. But the *process* by which all these ingredients are employed is little understood and it might be useful to think provisionally in terms of a cartographical analogy.' Curnock and Hardiker, 1979: 160 (*Towards Practice Theory*, London: R&KP)

