Beyond the instructional mode:
creating a holding environment
for learning about the use of self

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This paper provides a narrative account of a sequence of teaching and learning about the 'use of self' in professional practice, set in the context of a Masters programme of qualifying social work training. The processes of teaching and learning are described and analysed, focusing in particular on students' evaluation of the process, and on the ways in which the facilitators aimed to engage directly with the challenges and difficulties raised. These difficulties included anxieties about personal disclosure and discomfort with the challenge of working on personal material in an educational setting. A number of themes are identified from the ensuing evaluation and discussion, including firstly the need to manage anxiety and disclosure in the group, secondly the need to work with 'process' and to engage directly with student evaluation and thereby to identify 'turning points' in the learning, thirdly questions about ambiguities in the role of teaching staff in this work and finally the value of the concept of the 'holding environment' as a facilitative structure for learning.

Key words:

Self, reflection, holding environment, professional education, social work, experiential learning.

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Introduction

How can we teach the use of self? If we accept that a central element in much

professional practice - and especially in social work - is the purposeful use of self

in relationship (Ruch 2000 & 2005, Payne 1998, Lishman 1998, England 1985),

then educators face a considerable challenge in not only teaching *about* this

notoriously elusive concept, but also in actually enabling students to embark

upon and sustain that journey of professional and personal development which

we must assume is required. The task may be viewed as one of creating an

appropriate environment, within the constraints of the higher education system, in

which students can feel both challenged enough to explore their understanding of

themselves in their work and yet also safe enough to learn, somehow combining

the personal, professional and academic elements in their development.

This paper offers one model for undertaking this task which the author and a

colleague have employed. It describes a sequence of seminars on the use of

self and relationship-based practice which was offered as part of a qualifying

social work programme, and it identifies some of the challenges and dilemmas

faced by the staff and some of the difficulties experienced by the students in the

course of this learning. It demonstrates the complexity of the learning, which

operates at many different levels, and the different requirements placed upon the

staff, extending well beyond the familiar grounds of the imparting of knowledge or

the direct teaching of skills. Indeed, much of the knowledge and skill base for

this aspect of practice remains hard to define and therefore problematic to teach

- and yet the learning does need to take place! The approach described here combined psychodynamic and person-centred approaches, and was based on the assumption that there needed to be a strong experiential element in the learning, including an acknowledgement of the 'modelling' role of the teaching staff.

The context for this paper is that, although there is some recognition in the literature of the central role of the 'use of self' in social work and other forms of professional practice, and especially of its contribution to 'relationship-based practice' (e.g. Trevithick 2003, Sudbery 2002) there is not much recent work on the question of how to educate practitioners for this aspect of their practice. The need for closer attention to this area has been argued in connection with the risks to both practitioners and service-users if social workers are unable to properly acknowledge and address the powerful personal feelings which may arise in their work such as fear and extreme anxiety (Ferguson 2005, Mills 1998), but the question as to how such issues are to be tackled in training has been less fully explored. It is true that there have been a few papers on the broad theme of education for 'reflective practice' (Clare 2005, Ruch 2005), building largely on the work of Donald Schon and others, and in many social work texts there is a sense of general exhortation that practitioners need to be self-aware, critically reflective and able to make constructive use of the professional relationships which they establish with service users and others (e.g. Adams 2004). There have been a number of papers on psychodynamic aspects of the teaching and learning process, notably a useful collection by Barford (2002) and the classic text by Saltzberger-Wittenberg *et al* (1983). There is also a more general text on the 'emotionally intelligent lecturer' in higher education (Mortiboys 2002). However, there has been very little work on the detail of the challenges facing teachers and

learners in this field or on the principles and practice of education for the use of
self in social work practice.

This paper aims to begin addressing this gap in the literature by describing and
analysing a linked sequence of seminars which included theoretical discussion,
personal development work and attempts at the practical application of this
learning. In the work described we needed, as educators, to monitor very closely
the ways in which our learners were responding as people to the challenges
which we were inviting them to face. We needed to observe how the work in the
group was developing, to be aware of the wide range of thoughts and feelings
engendered by this process within individuals and subgroups as well as within
the larger group as a whole, and to respond thoughtfully to both challenge and
resistance, accepting these as inevitable elements in the learning process. It was
especially important to 'evaluate-in-action' with the students, to ensure that we
were aware of the impact of the experience throughout the group, so that we
could modify where necessary, but without ever losing our focus on moving the
process of learning forwards. This ongoing evaluation also produced many
opportunities for further experiential learning and development. In our approach
to this teaching our focus was consistently as much on process as on content
(but also on the connections and tensions between the two), and the present
paper reflects this emphasis, as process and content are interwoven in the
narrative. It will also be noted from the above comments that we placed at least
as much emphasis on *group* process as on individual learning, since we became
increasingly aware of how closely these two are connected. The paper itself is
necessarily descriptive, describing and reflecting upon a piece of work in
progress, and offered in the spirit of provoking thought and discussion of a
challenging area.

The seminar programme

The teaching was conducted in three 'terms' of five weeks each, with a cohort of 32 postgraduate students on the first year of a two-year qualifying programme in social work. Between each of these terms students undertook periods of assessed practice, of 40 days and 60 days respectively. The first term's 'Use of Self' seminars mainly involved working in the large group at enabling students to communicate with each other and to find an individual voice in the group context, which might be summarised as 'being a person within the group'.   The second term's seminars - which will be discussed in more detail below - had a focus on learning about oneself as an individual and reflecting upon how the self is 'used' in practice, which might be called 'finding and using the self within the person'. In the third term we invited students to bring for discussion examples of their use of self in practice, and to consider the application of theory to practice by examining what it actually requires of them (and how the processes of self-in-relationship unfold in practice whether or not you plan for them). We kept notes on each stage of this teaching, which as we have seen always included an element of open evaluation of process by the students, and later we fed back and discussed some of these thoughts with the students. The students also filled in standardised evaluation forms, which helped to inform our understanding of the processes of learning and teaching in this area. This paper focuses largely on the experience of the second of the three terms, which raised some key dilemmas in undertaking such teaching.

Term 2. The Use of Self in preparing for practice

The first term's work had focused on helping students to reflect on their general levels of self-awareness and on their confidence in relation to others, especially

in groups. This work involved semi-structured exercises in self-awareness and communication, and although it was offered in a relatively informal and gentle spirit, it had been experienced by some as either puzzling or challenging and had raised some anxiety in the group about working in the classroom on personal issues and on the difficulty of 'being oneself' in what was perceived as quite a large group. Between Terms 1 and 2 all students undertook an assessed placement in a group care setting (**reference**), including writing an assignment with an element of personal reflection on self and learning, which promoted a first stage in applying this very personal learning to the professional setting. In the second term the focus moved from the social self to the individual self as experienced through one's life story.

We now worked in a more structured way: each session began with discussion of a pre-distributed academic paper on the theme of 'use of self', before moving into an individual exercise in which people were invited to work upon some aspect of clarifying and examining their own life-story. The emphasis was thus also moving to a closer focus not only on personal issues through a developing awareness of one's own life story but also on its significance for us as professional workers. The introduction to this work included the usual 'health warning' about the strong feelings which might be engendered by some of the memories for some people, and about the range of support services which were available both within the programme and across the University. It was also agreed with the group that the material which they discussed in these sessions was confidential, and would not be 'taken outside the group' either by staff or by fellow-students. Staff would not join or 'sit in' on students' individual, paired or small group work unless invited to do so. Equally it was emphasized the work of

these sessions did not form any part of the assessed work of the programme, since this might have raised unnecessary extra anxiety.

For the first three sessions we asked students to use the device of a 'life-line', firstly to identify the main events in their lives, then in the second week to attach the relevant emotions to each stage, and in the third week to focus on some particularly strong emotion such as feelings associated with loss. In weeks 4 and 5 we broadened the dimensions for exploring self by introducing the use of genograms, ecomaps and sociograms (see Parker & Bradley 2003 pp 39-61 for examples of genograms and life-lines or 'life road-maps' as assessment tools). Each time the plan was for students to do some individual work first, followed by informal discussion in pairs and then by commenting in the larger group on the experience of having engaged in this personal work, but with no requirement or expectation of personal disclosure in the plenary discussions. Finally there would be some time each week for general reflection on the work of that session.

Student evaluation

By the end of the second of these sessions the feedback in the final plenary was mixed: some people had engaged with the individual task wholeheartedly, while others had found it increasingly difficult. A small number said that they had found the first session on lifelines very painful, one referring to it as 'shock therapy', and some saying that they had felt anxious about coming into this second session. One person said she had decided to sit close to the same two students she had sat with the previous week so that she would not have to go through explaining her whole lifeline again to somebody else – an understandable strategy which seemed to suggest an instinctive need and ability to 'manage' the experience. There was a view expressed by some students that there was not enough

'support' for students who might be facing difficult personal issues arising from the work of these seminars. Whereas most students seemed to agree that this was a necessary area of learning, they were finding it uncomfortable and awkward.

While we were not surprised by some of the anxieties that had been raised, the strength of this reaction in some of the students did come as quite a surprise, since all that they had been asked to do at this stage was to list the main events of their life on a piece of paper and then to identify the emotions which they associated with some of these events. A small number of students said that they had chosen not to undertake any of the lifeline work, because they felt there was a risk of 'stirring up' powerful feelings which they had previously dealt with and which they now wished to leave behind. Some said that it was not so much the task as the public setting which they found so threatening: they would prefer to be given 'home work' to complete on tasks such as these. This latter group commented on the anxiety generated by being asked in the classroom to refer to any aspect of their personal life, even where this only involved listing key events on a piece of paper which they were not asked to make public. Some students described an initial sense of shock at encountering aspects of themselves and their own personal and family histories, a reaction which perhaps indicated the extent to which many of them had until then managed to keep their personal and professional lives separate. It was as if there was an element of unexpected 'disclosure to self' in these realisations. Mixed in with the anxiety, there was perhaps also a sense of shame in some students that they might be 'shown up' or 'found out' as in some way lesser than the professional persona which they wished to adopt, even though it had been acknowledged in Term 1 that we may

all have an element of 'the client within', or what has been termed the 'wounded healer' (Nouwen 1994).

In retrospect, however, it is not surprising that some students should have found these sessions so threatening, and in our academic role as seminar leaders we had perhaps protected ourselves from appreciating the level of impact of such exercises on individuals. The academic literature on use of self often has a quality of 'recollection in tranquillity' about it, and perhaps predictably so, since raw emotion is usually filtered out of academic papers, apart from the case material in some clinical papers. In higher education settings generally, the expression of emotion may still sometimes be seen as inappropriate and unhelpful, even in the context of education for professional practice. What was verbalised very strongly in these discussions, however, was precisely the inescapable rawness and pain of human experience for some individuals. For some people the process of recollection was far from tranquil, as they recalled experiences of anxiety, humiliation and probably in some cases abuse. Even if such experiences were not directly disclosed to the group, nevertheless the individual might feel re-exposed to their own pain, and thus potentially vulnerable in the public setting of the classroom. For some others, it was clear from the comments made that the pain related not so much to past experience as to current events and tensions in their lives, with several individuals struggling with the turmoil of conflictual relationships. For these people it was especially difficult to find that the classroom, which may have been assumed to offer respite from current difficulties, was now a place in which their personal life was back on the agenda. This difficulty was also highlighted after the end of the sessions, when students needed to 'compose themselves' before entering another class with

perhaps a much more pragmatic or intellectual focus - which raises an important timetabling issue for those planning to offer this sort of learning.

As facilitators we listened carefully to these reflections and responded as openly as we could manage, encouraging the verbalisation of anxiety and discomfort, and being ready to admit if mistakes had been made in the presentation or handling of the sessions. We said that we did need to find a way to help them to undertake this work, and that they might be able to support each other in it. We offered to re-think the sessions for the following week and if necessary to come in with a plan and adjust the reading for next week.

We had instinctively decided that it was appropriate to allow the expression of these anxieties - not that we would make hasty changes to the programme in response, but that we would take their anxieties seriously. At the same time we had to be aware that what was being expressed was in fact only coming from a minority of the group, and that others might feel differently - a reality which was confirmed in the following days when other individuals informed us that they valued the sessions and had found it useful to reflect in this way upon themselves in the context of their professional learning. While it was important to acknowledge anxiety, therefore, it was also important not to thereby magnify it, or to assume that those who expressed the greatest anxiety were necessarily representative of the rest of the group. In other words we needed to 'contain' the anxiety and allow it to be examined and learned from, and perhaps also thereby to model the capacity for containment (Bion 1962). The theme of providing a 'holding environment' (Winnicott 1965) as a template for much professional practice was to emerge more explicitly in the third term, but at this stage it was certainly a model which informed our thinking in working with this group. It also

thereby led us directly into an element of modelling or 'matching' (Ward & McMahon 1998) which is often present in professional education: we were seeking to provide a form of emotional containment for the student group, which would match the provision of such holding in practice, and which we hoped they would learn (partly from experience both conscious and unconscious) to be able to offer in turn to their own clients.

Team reflection & review

As a staff team we reviewed this session afterwards and felt that it had been successful in the sense that the students had engaged with the task, even if several had found it very uncomfortable. We decided not to change the format for the following week, but recognised the need to think about the range of available methods and to adjust the reading accordingly. We also decided that there was a need for us to be more explicit in our containment of the anxieties raised by the personal work, and more conscious of providing a holding environment in the sessions. We wrote to the student group briefly, acknowledging responding to the concerns expressed, outlining the structure which we intended to follow in future sessions, and explaining the rationale for this. In each of the forthcoming sessions there was firstly to be time for open group discussion, including discussion of the reading for the week, followed by an introduction to the personal work, time for that work to be undertaken at an individual level and then reflected upon in paired or small group discussions, and finally a closing plenary in which the whole process could be reflected upon and evaluated. By emphasizing this containing structure we again hoped to provide a holding environment for the learning.

We also decided that the level of anxiety was such that we did not want to risk distracting from the emotional learning by offering a piece of reading which might be too demanding intellectually. We offered a chapter by Clare Winnicott on the development of self awareness (Winnicott 1964) rather than a more advanced conceptual paper on reflective practice. Our aim was to provide something which would speak as directly as possible to the current level of feeling and awareness in the group, while still reminding them that the purpose of this sequence was not personal self-indulgence but the preparation of the self for the discipline of professional practice.

Outcome

The following session did indeed feel more contained and successful: we began by acknowledging the difficulties expressed in the previous group and by outlining the format for this and following sessions, which was intended to provide a containing structure. The 'self-awareness' paper was warmly received by the student group, who had found it very accessible and pertinent, even though it had been written forty years previously. The personal task this week was to identify a theme, such as loss, for which they could identify examples in their life-lines. Although this was proposed as an individual task, many students went straight into pairs or small groups to discuss their life-lines, which may for some have been a flight into relative safety - perhaps avoiding the more powerful instances of individual loss or keeping them at a relatively superficial level, because of the greater need for emotional safety in the group setting. It may equally have been the case that some students felt it better to work on their personal material 'in relationship' rather than in isolation. After a further reminder from the staff about the need to focus these discussions, the room quietened somewhat and the discussions appeared to become more purposeful. The

plenary discussion at the end of this session was quietly reflective and 'in touch', with several students clearly having felt moved by the content of their individual and paired work, and able to reflect positively on the benefit of having done so. It appeared that the increased emphasis on emotional containment had indeed enabled students to feel safer in undertaking the personal work, though no less challenged by it in many cases. In the subsequent two sessions of the term many students began to work with more confidence and engagement on the issues arising from considering their own lives and their family and social backgrounds.

Term 3: Use of Self in practice

The final sequence in these three terms' work followed on from a second period of assessed practice in which students had been encouraged to keep in mind the theme of 'use of self'. Although there was no explicit teaching of the use of self during this practice learning period, students were again required to keep a personal / professional journal in which they should record their thoughts and feelings about their work. Their own contribution to their placement report included a reflective account of their learning, in which they described their main learning experiences and processes during the placement, drawing upon their reflective journal and other sources.

This final term's work consisted of four sessions, in which we focused increasingly on the application of students' emerging 'use of self' in practice. We began by asking them to give examples of ways in which they had been aware in practice of issues of 'use of self', and invited the whole group to listen to these examples 'in the round', which created a very powerful picture of the challenges faced in practice. These feelings were picked up in the second week as we looked at the tensions between the elements of 'task' and 'relationship' in practice

(Howe 1998), working both from their own examples and from a vignette which we had devised. In week 3 we explored Winnicott's concept of the 'holding environment' both as an account of a critical stage in early childhood development and in the parenting role, but also as a metaphor for professional practice. In the final session we explored another concept of Winnicott's, the concept of transitional phenomena, and the ways in which social workers may sometimes be 'used' by service users as a sort of transitional object. We also used some time to review and evaluate the whole sequence with the students and to discuss issues arising.

The overall evaluation of these sessions by the student group was by now very positive, with many feeling that this sequence had gone to the heart of their own concerns as developing practitioners and that they had made major strides during the year in developing their self-awareness and their capacity to handle the complex and demanding relationships which arise in social work. It must be acknowledged that a small number of students remained uncomfortable with either the personal element of this learning or the emerging psychodynamic framework which underpinned our work. Discussion in the final evaluation also included reflections on the degree to which this 'personal' element in the social work task could also incorporate a 'political' motivation and activism, with at least one student feeling that the implicit message of the teaching had been one of devaluing the political, which was certainly not what was intended. This was a useful reminder of the need to retain an holistic and inclusive approach to relationship-based practice, and to keep an explicit focus on empowerment and the structural dimensions of practice (cf Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990).

Discussion: main themes

This seminar sequence brought to light a number of themes which may begin to address the question which opened this paper: how can we teach the use of self? The themes which emerged are as much about process as about content, confirming our view that it is only by working explicitly with both process and content that this learning can be achieved. We have identified four themes: the use of the group as both a setting and a method for learning, the use of 'turning points', ambiguities about the role of the staff and the concept of the holding environment.

i) Managing anxiety and disclosure in the group

Several students articulated concerns about being asked to undertake 'such personal work' in the context of a large group. In fact we aimed to demonstrate respect for such concerns by never asking for direct personal disclosure of individual or family history or related feelings in the large group discussions. These discussions were reserved primarily for general debate and theorising from issues identified either in the small groups or in the recommended reading, and secondly for evaluative reflections about the experience of having undertaken the personal work at an individual or small group level. Nevertheless this latter distinction turned out to be a harder one to operationalise than we had perhaps imagined. In other words, those who felt uncomfortable about addressing any aspect of 'self' in a public and academic setting would be likely to initially feel uncomfortable about even being asked to reflect on having done so, and unable to keep separate talking *about* self-exploration from actually doing it. Meanwhile, other students were either less anxious or less inhibited about self-disclosure in the large group, and in one or two cases chose to reveal things about themselves (such as a history of abuse or neglect) which may have felt like

'too much knowledge' for the rest of the group, and to which we needed to respond very carefully. Such disclosures probably also had the unintended effect of making the more private or anxious individuals feel that an expectation was thereby being established that they, too, should disclose in a similar way, and thus of raising the anxiety levels still further. Such situations are hard to forestall or control, but the responsibility of the facilitators is probably to remind the group that personal disclosure is neither expected nor required in the large group, but that where it is volunteered it will be acknowledged and respected.

Our response to the students who were anxious about disclosure was perhaps not totally unambiguous either. Although we respected their concerns and encouraged them to make their own individual decisions about how to maintain personal boundaries, we also urged them to recognise that in practice such decisions about disclosure often arrive unannounced. They were likely to encounter various implicit and explicit challenges to their personal boundaries, which they would need to be able to manage appropriately for both their own and others' sakes. For example, some service users might ask them direct questions about themselves which, even if they chose not to answer, might nevertheless trigger thoughts and feelings which were uncomfortable, so it was perhaps as well to be prepared for such eventualities. While being 'pushed' in class to anticipate such moments might feel uncomfortable, it was likely to bear fruit in terms of feeling better prepared to meet the challenges of practice.

There is a lesson here for educators. If, as we are proposing, education for professional practice must include directly addressing the question of 'use of self' directly rather than leaving it to chance, then we must be prepared to encounter considerable anxiety at times within both individuals and groups of students. We

must be ready not only to accept the expression of such anxiety but also to challenge excessive defensiveness and promote the value of developing insight and self-awareness. For teaching staff to challenge students in this way - to confront their defensiveness and explore their anxiety - is a very powerful thing to do in a classroom situation. If such challenges are handled insensitively there is clearly a risk of making matters worse rather than better, of provoking more rather than less defensiveness, but if the task is undertaken with appropriate care the benefits should justify it.

Given the nature of human experience, for most people there are perhaps few pain-free routes to self-awareness. Some students have commented that they would like to have been warned in advance about the challenging nature of this learning and the potential pain of self-reflection. While we would sympathise with this feeling, and some general warnings had been given, it may be difficult to warn people of something which is largely within themselves but which they will perhaps not fully recognise until they (re-)experience it.

Additionally, there are common anxieties about the nature of large group discussions, such that many people feel very anxious about saying *anything* in what they perceive as a 'large' group, whether the content is 'personal' or not. Here the ground is perhaps clearer, in that there is a strong educational case to be made for acquiring the skills and confidence in speaking in large groups, since the welfare of service users may at times depend upon the professional worker being able to advocate confidently on their behalf in situations which might be intimidating, such as case conferences or court proceedings. In fact there is a wide range of perceptions as to what constitutes a 'large' group, with some feeling that anything more than a group of six is large, and others setting the

number much higher (Hopper and Weyman 1975). Several students commented on their experience of 'the circle', i.e. the chairs arranged around the room for plenary discussion; some initially found this a very threatening format, although they recognised that it was probably the most effective way of promoting dialogue within the large group. By the end of the three terms' work many commented on how much more confident and secure they felt in this setting, and able to transfer this confidence into the practice setting.

ii) Working with process and the use of 'turning points'

It will be clear that the working methods used in this teaching included paying close attention to both the process and the content of the learning, and to the connections between the two, often drawing explicitly on the lessons to be learned from shared experience in the classroom. In particular we used the challenges presented by conflict and dissent, both within the student group itself and between students and staff, to model ways of learning more about the self through dealing with experience. Our aim was to show that, rather than avoiding anxiety, discomfort or distress, it could be productive to acknowledge and address it directly. We thereby aimed to use such expression of anxiety as offering potential turning points in the understanding and progress of the whole group. In this way we also sought to model the practice of using the learning which can be derived from analysing current situations as a template for re-working one's capacity to relate and understand in other situations, and to model a readiness to engage with and respond constructively to challenge and conflict.

There were three main turning points of this sort during the work of these seminars: firstly in Term 1 when some students said that they found the apparently unstructured nature of the groupwork sessions too confusing,

secondly in Term 2 when some said that they found the public nature of the individual sessions too threatening, and thirdly towards the end of Term 2 when there had been conflict between staff and students (as well as within the student group) about dwindling attendance at other classes. On each occasion we took the approach of encouraging the verbalisation of a range of feelings about their experience, and taking pains to suggest any underlying themes. In each instance some of the feelings expressed were strong, including students' anxieties about being 'exposed' as either a flawed individual or somehow not up to the task of professional practice, or feeling that they were being disrespected or devalued either by each other or by staff, for instance through the imposition of unreasonable pressures to meet deadlines or to reach certain academic standards. On each occasion we also reviewed the session afterwards as a staff team and re-examined the process and content of the session. We also developed the practice of writing a short summary of key sessions such as these and circulating these notes to the student group afterwards, sometimes with some commentary or an indication of further thoughts on the part of the staff as to how we would take the work forward in the next session.

iii) Ambiguities about the role of the staff

We were conscious throughout this teaching of the various roles which we had adopted with the students. We were already well known to the group in a variety of other roles, including as teachers of other subjects, as personal tutors and as assessors of their academic work; we were thus correctly perceived as holding considerable formal power. We would probably also have been perceived as holding other forms of power, especially as being two white middle-aged males working with an almost all-white and largely female group. Nevertheless we were aiming here to work in a facilitative role, promoting self-awareness and

encouraging the expression of anxiety and the exploration of difference, even though we did not spell out this shift of role explicitly at the start. Issues of gender and power were clearly present in the room at times and will probably have made it even more difficult for some students to contemplate the effects of - for example - abusive earlier (or current) experience. It would certainly have been preferable to have been able to offer the group staffing which would have better reflected principles of diversity and equal opportunity, and we conceded that point.

Towards the end of the first term's work students pointed out the shift of staff roles from the more didactic to the more facilitative style. It was agreed that it might have been helpful if we had explained and acknowledged these different roles at the beginning of the sequence, although it could also be argued that there was learning potential in the students' own recognition of this shift, and in their finding appropriate ways (and confidence) to articulate it in discussion. Since the shift on our part was from the didactic to the facilitative, it was perhaps fitting that the shift was not formally announced but gradually discovered. The shift, in any case, was not total or irreversible, because we nevertheless retained our formal responsibilities and accountabilities. What we were perhaps modelling was the management of a role within a role: working facilitatively within a more formal context, which is akin to the sort of role-management which social workers and other professionals often have to perform. In other words, this juggling of roles or 'personae' involved modelling one aspect of the very use of self which we were aiming to address in this sequence.

It will also be clear that working in this way with groups of students on their use of self makes particular demands of the teaching staff. We, too, needed to be able

to draw on our own use of self in order to make sense of the feelings emerging in the group discussions (Mortiboys 2002). We also needed to be able to communicate effectively with each other and collaborate *'in vivo'* in the classroom setting: responding to challenge, reflecting on our own personal reading of unfolding discussions and making explicit our personal views where appropriate. Again there is a strong element of modelling involved: if we were seen not to be able to 'practice what we preached' the learning in the classes risked being seriously undermined.

iv) The holding environment as a facilitative structure for learning

What emerged for us most clearly in working on this material was the importance of creating an atmosphere and structure which would facilitate the learning and reconcile its inherent tensions. There are two central challenges involved in all teaching on the use of self. The first of these is that because the learning consists primarily of self-development and personal realisations on the part of the learner, it is not a topic which lends itself well to mere didacticism. The learning has to be experienced, reflected upon, integrated into the self and owned by the participant in a process which is quite different from the simple acquisition of intellectual knowledge or practical skills.

The second challenge is contained in the paradox that although the learning is highly individual and reflexive, it also happens primarily *in relationship* rather than in private. The individual may be stimulated into recognising aspects of self through the various challenges and stimuli provided, but the work of converting these experiences into authentic learning for practice seems to happen primarily in dialogue with others - or at least that is where it is explored, tested out and validated. This is why the combination of individual and paired work, plus small

group and larger group discussion seems to produce the most productive learning opportunities and why, incidentally, it would be very hard to undertake such teaching either through distance learning or through merely providing a reading-list.

The implication of these two challenges is that the learning environment needs to provide opportunities for individuals both to reflect on themselves and the events and influences of their lives, and to engage with others on constructing and confirming the meaning of their experiences so that they can begin to consciously 'use' the self in practice.

An especially helpful model for developing this form of learning is Winnicott's concept of the 'holding environment', with its origins in the parental function of 'holding' the infant emotionally as well as physically and containing its anxiety in order to promote growth and allow the potential for development to evolve. Winnicott himself was explicit about transferring the 'holding' metaphor into the professional context in settings as diverse as psychoanalysis, social work and residential care (Davis & Wallbridge 1981), while others have applied the metaphor directly into the educational setting (Greenhalgh 1994, Ward 1998, Richards 2002).

In the present context the holding environment provides four interlocking elements:
-       the sense of an 'open' or 'potential' space within which students are encouraged to explore the overlaps between personal, professional and intellectual learning;

- a sense of that space nevertheless being structured sufficiently to prevent anxiety taking over or running out of control, and to allow for the anxiety to be examined and understood (in other words a sense of the space being 'safe');

- a sense that there is a process of learning evolving through time towards change and within unfolding relationship;

- and a sense that the overall process is being symbolically 'held' by facilitators who will show care for people's sensitivity as well as concern for their growth and learning.

The holding environment can apply at any level of resolution, certainly encompassing both the intra- and the inter-personal dynamics which emerged in this sequence of seminars. In other words, in addition to providing a firm but supportive overall structure for the group process, and ultimately aiming to enable the group to provide that collectively for itself, it is also sometimes necessary to provide a 'holding' response and even interpretation to a perplexed individual within that process. Sometimes what needs to be conveyed is the 'permission to proceed' in what may to the student feel like uncharted territory, while at other times an element of holding back an over-anxious or over-zealous individual may be necessary. In the management of the 'turning points' described above it was important to allow for the expression of strong feelings such as doubt, fear and anger, in order that people should feel genuinely listened to, before responding to specific points raised, otherwise there was a risk that the holding environment would have turned into a merely controlling environment.

Finally, and in keeping with the overall approach described, the holding environment is both medium and message. The aim is that students will learn

directly from their own experience in the classroom of being appropriately 'held' and will subsequently be able to offer similar holding to others through their own practice and especially through their own 'use of self'. The holding environment, then, is not simply a 'safe place' in which to learn but an active and dynamic process, orientated towards growth and change, and one which needs to be internalised by the learners so that they can discover not only what that means for themselves but also how they can provide it for others. The use of self in professional relationships is after all an interactive and engaging process rather than a passive one in which workers simply soak up or 'manage' others' distress.

Conclusion

The work described here was very much 'work in progress' which unfolded in ways which we had not fully anticipated. At the same time this emergent style of working has allowed for creativity and responsiveness in the classroom which a more programmatic or didactic approach might have prevented. The lesson for the facilitators is that the holding environment for professional learning can encompass and promote the personal development which is necessary if students are to become fluent and resourceful in their use of self in relationship. At the same time the attention to process, and working with what emerges in the group, means that there will always be an element of the unknown and unpredictable in this area of teaching and learning. Although this style of working is somewhat at odds with a more competence-oriented or content-driven approach to education, it can create a culture which offers learning opportunities not easily achieved by other means. There remains much further work to be done on developing learning opportunities in respect of the use of self, but the work described here may be seen as offering one route into this challenging territory.

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