

## **Critical thinking as integral to social work practice**

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*We are whip lashed by parents who tell us they send their children to college not so the children can discover for themselves what they believe but to confirm what parents already know, whether about politics, evolution, race, or religion* (Wayne Flynt, University of Auburn, Alabama: Birmingham Post Herald, 24 April 2001).

### **Abstract**

The paper examines the role of critical thinking in an experience-based model of social work education. Within this model, the development of a critical approach to our own understanding of, as well as to existing knowledge about the world is fundamental for students and educators alike. Critical thinking is defined as more than a rational, step-by-step problem solving process; it is seen as the systematic application of critical thinking skills to real life situations that can only be learned and refined through practice within a particular discipline. It presumes a social constructionist understanding of the world whereby knowledge is a social construction; where the limits of knowledge are recognised; and where knowledge is seen as ever-changing, even shifting and unstable. This is regarded as a very different process from learning to apply knowledge that one accepts uncritically as true, reliable and correct. Finally creativity is viewed as pivotal to critical thinking and to preparing students for the ambiguities and complexities of social work practice. As well as describing the critical thinking components of the social work program, the paper shows how a critical thinking stance can be fostered in the classroom, reports on our ongoing evaluation of our attempts to teach students to think critically and on the challenges and rewards experienced thus far.

The four-year social work degree at the University of Newcastle in New South Wales, Australia, the entry level qualification for social work in Australia, has adopted an experience-based model of learning which emphasises critical thinking, and dialogical, collaborative and independent learning through the medium of small groups. When, in the second year of the undergraduate social work program, the groups were asked for a description of the learning model as they had experienced it, one group drew a spiral which began in wide arcs and narrowed as they saw themselves using their new understanding to address concrete tasks. This aptly describes the expansion of thought that occurs through *experience* and through critical examination of experience (which includes challenging beliefs and assumptions, and lateral and creative thinking) and the application of this learning in addressing specific tasks.

Critical thinking is the systematic application of critical thinking skills to real life situations that can only be learned and refined through practice within a particular discipline, through doing and reflecting on what we have done and why we did it that way. Doll (1993) describes the development of practice wisdom in social work as an “iterative process of doing-critiquing-doing-critiquing” (p. 174). Critical thinking is more than a rational, step-by-step problem solving process or exercise in logic (Gibbons & Gray, 2002, in press). Dean (1993) writes that the aim is to develop social workers “whose practice combines the use of artistic, intuitive processes with disciplined evaluation and thoughtfulness” (p. 72). Critical thinking presumes that each person constructs or makes sense of his or her own reality; is able to recognise the limits of his or her knowledge; and to see knowledge as ever-changing, even shifting and unstable. The critical thinker approaches a question, situation, problem, or issue with an

evaluative mindset wondering about its strengths and limitations, meaning, purpose, truth, validity and a range of possible options to respond as well as outcomes of any actions taken in response to the situation. Critical thinking is crucial to the process of moving students from merely acquiring and displaying knowledge to critically examining and engaging with the issues of social work as a discipline and a profession. As Neuman and Blundo (2000) note, students must be encouraged to recognise and consider that the way in which “they view the world has significant consequences for their work and those with whom they will be working” (p. 27).

Proponents of experiential learning, such as Dewey and later Freire, saw an inextricable link between critical thinking and experiential learning. While valuing experiential learning, Freire noted that “the uncritical celebration of experience needs to be avoided” (Boud & Miller, 1996, p. 9). He recognised that learning from experience needed to take place within a context of sound critical thinking skills and described effective critical teachers as needing to have competence (particularly in communication and group facilitation), courage to persevere in challenging assumptions, humility, political clarity in the capacity to break free from dominant paradigms, and to be prepared to take risks in order to engage students creatively in the excitement of learning (Freire, 1994).

Thinking critically includes the synthesis, comparison and evaluation of ideas from a variety of sources, such as texts, direct observation and experience, and social dialogue. It involves more than an in-depth examination of knowledge sources and requires students to “engage with, restructure and reflect on knowledge through a wide and differing range of thinking tasks” (Vardi, 1999, p. 101). Immersing students in critical thinking requires critical talk, dialogue and engagement by both teachers and

learners. This means situating learning tasks, units or courses in a context where reflective talk and incisive discussion is encouraged; reading material is interrogated and evaluated; activities and exercises demand analysis and problem-solving; and written assessments require in-depth synthesis, reframing, evaluation, and analysis. Teachers need to encourage assumptions to be unearthed and challenged, and theories and approaches to be rigorously analysed and debated (Vardi, 1999).

Creativity is vital to critical thinking. “When we encourage students to think critically we are inviting them to think creatively, to come up with new ideas and innovative ways of solving problems” (Gibbons & Gray, 2002, in press) and we are preparing them for the ambiguities and complexities of social work practice. In terms of this approach, the qualities or abilities that characterise critical thinking are:

- A rejection of standardised formats for problem solving.
- An interest in a wide range of related and divergent fields.
- Multiple perspectives on a problem.
- A view of the world as relative and contextual rather than universal and absolute.
- Frequent use of trial and error methods in experimentation with alternative approaches.
- A future orientation and optimistic embrace of change.
- Self-confidence and trust in personal judgement (Brookfield, 1987).

Within the Newcastle model, the learning tasks are structured in such a way that the trigger experience presents students with the “felt difficulty” (Dewey, 1910, p.3) as a spur for critical thinking (Gibbons & Gray, 2002, in press). The process of critical thinking thus involves the experience of a challenging situation or issue, followed by

the identification of assumptions or hypotheses about it, observation and refinement of the hypotheses, the application of reasoning and judgment, the development of alternative responses and finally taking action to respond to the situation. In so doing students are rewarded for showing that they have:

1. Understood the full nature and impact of the issue: They do this by having a clear statement of the problem.
2. Studied it carefully, bringing all the relevant facts to bear on it through reading and research: They do this by showing evidence of reading.
3. Specified clearly the way in which their own values and beliefs colour the assumptions they make about the problem and thus their interpretation of the facts about it: They do this by discussing their values and beliefs about the particular issue and the assumptions they make about it.
4. Looked at it from as many points of view as possible and to understand that the choices they make about it are based on their own subjective understanding and judgments in light of what they have learnt, experienced and know about the problem: They do this by presenting multiple perspectives on the problem or issue.
5. Understood existing theory, including areas of agreement and contention, and the limitations of knowledge on the problem area: They do this by describing areas of agreement and debate in the literature.
6. Applied theory to practice by considering the implications of the problem, possible solutions and areas for further research: They do this by presenting a clear argument for the solutions that they propose.

Assessing students' use of critical thinking involves looking for awareness of values and beliefs, the capacity to identify and develop a well-reasoned argument, and the ability to communicate these ideas effectively to appropriate intellectual standards, such as clarity of thought and communication, flexibility and fairness, and articulation of other points of view.

### **The Newcastle model**

The Newcastle model of social work education draws together several compatible perspectives in social work which deepen understanding of the person-in-environment, the importance of values, and reiterates our concern with social justice, namely, the constructivist, social constructionist, ecosystems, structuralist (including feminism), and strengths perspectives (Davis, 1993; Gray, 1995; Laird, 1993; Sessions, 1993; Middleman & Goldberg Wood, 1993; Saleebey, 1997; Weick, 1993; Witkin, 1990, 2000; Wood & Middleman, 1989). Through experience-based learning, we bring these related perspectives to the classroom situation. *Constructivism* teaches us that people create or make sense of their own realities. They are, therefore, responsible for the ideas, beliefs and values they hold about the world. With personal awareness and reflection about how these ideas are formed and the values they hold, they can alter these perspectives through a process of social dialogue, sharing their perspectives with others and listening to and learning about alternative perspectives or worldviews. Hence we learn from *social constructionism* that individuals do not learn in a vacuum but through their interaction with their context or environment and in conversation with others. Thus we create the environment for this learning to take place by making experience central to learning, by creating the social conditions for reflection and

dialogue through students working together in small groups, and by providing them, through resource sessions, which might include literature, video, talks by practitioners, and the like, with alternative, multicultural views and perspectives. We teach students about the *structural* nature of society. They learn how oppression, racism and discrimination arise and are maintained by existing structures and processes (Mullaly, 1997). We teach them to identify and critique dominant discourse and present them with alternative views on social reality and central to this process is the *strengths perspective*. We focus on the resources and capacities each student brings to the group, the more diverse the group, the greater the potential for learning. It is in this sense that the term '*constructive social work*' is used. Newcastle University pioneered problem-based learning in Australia. However, we, in social work, did not want to base our model on a negative concept like 'problem'. Hence we adopted the term 'experience-based' to indicate social work's strengths focus. At the same time, 'experience' best reflected the *experiential model* of teaching we use (Goldstein, 2001). Our model integrates theory and practice, levels of intervention, and campus and field learning. It focuses on the development of critical thinking skills and critical reflection as the means through which informed understanding is fostered. Small groups provide both the context and medium through which this learning takes place. Thus within experience-based learning, critical thinking, and dialogical, collaborative and independent learning are pivotal (see Figure 1).

Our social justice approach to education not only fits with social work values, but is also seen as a re-engagement with the experiential learning theories of the beginning of the twentieth century developed by early pragmatists like Dewey, du Bois and James.

These pioneers, and later Freire, saw education as much more than instilling knowledge but also as the basis of a free and democratic society:

Education must help learners develop the knowledge, principles and capacities to work generatively with the unresolved issues of equity and justice that continually confront us in our lives and in our work (Knefelkamp & Schneider, 1997, p. 338).

Parton and O'Byrne (2001) also used the term "constructive social work" (p.2) to emphasise process, the plurality of knowledge and voice, strength and possibility, and the relational quality of knowledge. We use it to additionally embrace the structural perspective which has positioned individuals as shaped, constrained and sometimes destroyed by social and historical conditions over which they have little, if any control. With this view, social workers argue that the way to change individuals and to alleviate personal suffering is to transform the unequal and oppressive social conditions that disfigure social relations. This should be a collective endeavour wherein the exploited group or class will work to change power relations. In applying radical theory to social work practice, social workers are called upon to play an instrumental role in raising the client's (whether individual, group or community) consciousness and in harnessing the client's own experience as the main source of undermining class domination, patriarchy, racial stereotyping, and the like towards the goal of social transformation (Dominelli, 1988, 1989, 1996; Middleman & Goldberg, 1993; Mullaly, 1997).

Strengths-based approaches recognise that power has both constraining and enabling effects. They have arisen in response to deficits focused models of intervention



influenced by medicine and radical approaches which, in seeing the answer in overthrowing the powerful group and replacing it with another which seems to in turn oppress, does not seem to have the answers either. Strengths based approaches focus on client strengths, on the strengths in the helping relationship or in the context in which helping takes place, and on strengths or resources in the environment which people can use to achieve greater equality. Saleebey (1997) and Weick, Rapp, Sullivan and Kisthardt (1989) point out that even though we can usually find resources and strengths in most situations, using a strengths-based approach does not mean that we ignore injustice, oppression, and marginalisation. They do not exclude structural analyses but tend to focus more on the meaning clients attach to their experience, the way in which people construct meaning for themselves. There would not be the same pressure to conscientise clients by raising their awareness of the way in which society oppresses or marginalises them even though this might be part of the worker's understanding.

Strengths-based approaches attempt to lessen the power of the social worker as expert, emphasising the critical thinking value for intellectual humility. Instead power is situated as far as possible in the hands of clients (at all levels). In this way strengths approaches move away from conceptions of clients as oppressed and powerless, and the mirroring of this in the professional helping relationship, and focus rather on what clients know, how they have survived traumatic experiences, what they can do, how they connect with significant others, and with community networks and services, and with the way in which we, as social workers, can support them. The notion of resilience is central and there is an emphasis on working collaboratively with clients, on advocacy and activism with clients as leaders not followers. This connects with social justice

issues such as the distribution of resources, how people work with larger systems, and their access to resources.

A social constructionist perspective sees the person as cognitively and affectively constructing meaning and knowledge through interaction with others at the same time emphasising the social environment as inclusive of “the historical context, prevailing and contradictory social values and norms, dimensions of culture and gender, and the influence of political realities and power” (Neuman & Blundo, 2000, p. 24-25). Social constructionists are interested in the way in which the development of human understanding is shaped by social, environmental, historical, local and cultural factors. They hold that understanding can never be independent of the individuals involved in this process and the context in which it takes place. The idea that knowledge is shaped by human perception and interaction is not new. It can be traced to some of the pre-Socratic philosophers, who were concerned with sources of knowledge. More recently social constructionism is seen to have its origins in the writing of philosophers like Vico and Kant, and in the work of Dewey.

The social constructionist view differs significantly from the perspective of knowledge as external, objective or true. Knowledge is not acquired through a process of copying or replicating. It holds that one comes to know reality only by acting on it. What we learn in active interaction with the environment is dependent upon our own structuring of these experiences (von Glaserfeld & Smock, 1974). An educational approach based on this view therefore focuses on students’ experiences both in and outside the classroom and on the processes by which they construct meaning from these experiences through their interactions with others. Social constructionist learning is based on students’ active participation in problem-solving and critical thinking

regarding a learning activity which they find relevant and engaging. They are 'constructing' their own knowledge by testing ideas and approaches based on their prior knowledge and experience, sharing these with one another, applying them to a new situation, and integrating the new knowledge gained with pre-existing intellectual constructs.

### **Insert Figure 1**

Social constructionism informs the Newcastle model on a number of levels. First it accepts that a characteristic of social work practice is "the uncertainty of 'not knowing' and expecting the unexpected in trying to understand the ever-evolving dynamics in a client system" (Neuman & Blundo, 2000, p.26). In the face of students' expectations to have formulaic solutions to the sorts of issues social workers encounter, they are encouraged to develop a range of skills with which to work through decisions about their response. They begin to understand uncertainty, ambiguity and the unpredictability of human behaviour.

Although it is impossible to teach students how to deal with every situation they might encounter, it is possible to teach them the processes they will need to engage in for effective social work practice. These include forming working relationships which position the client as expert, engaging individuals and groups, challenging values and assumptions, listening, thinking on their feet, being creative and resourceful in problem solving, accessing relevant knowledge, conducting research, networking and thinking critically. Developing a critical approach, not only to their own understanding but also to existing knowledge about the world, is a fundamental skill in this model of learning.

Second, students are taught to see knowledge as a social construction, situated within a social, cultural, historical, and local context. They are encouraged to gain a sense of its ever-changing quality and the need for a lifelong approach to learning to keep abreast of new knowledge and research. The small group context, in exposing students to a range of different views, is essential in this process.

Thirdly, a social constructionist perspective involves learners in actively constructing their knowledge in terms of their own prior experience and the meaning they attach to the people and situations they confront in keeping with the underlying philosophy of experiential learning (Goldstein, 2001). Meaningful learning is seen to be that which is useful to real life situations. The teacher, as the coach or facilitator, works strategically with students to help them gain this insight and awareness, through critical thinking and constantly applying learning to past or present experiences.

The teacher's role as facilitator within this model serves to shift the balance of power "as the instructor is removed from the position of 'expert' who presents codified knowledge to a passive learner ... the constructivist sees the instructor as the provider of perturbations to the students' current state of understanding" (Neuman & Blundo, 2000, p. 27). Within the small group, different values, perspectives and beliefs are shared and challenged. This is a dialogical model where students are heard and where ample space is provided for individual and group participation. The giving and receiving of constructive feedback is crucial to the process of building and capitalising on strengths within the classroom, to acceptance and tolerance of different interpretations and viewpoints, and to the development of critical thinking skills (Gibbons & Gray, 2002, in press). In working independently on learning tasks, students

employ a self-directed approach to learning which essentially prepares them for lifelong learning. Furthermore, through skilled facilitation, students come to see the group as an amalgam of strengths, abilities, talents and resources in which they can work together to accomplish their learning tasks.

### **Model, learning content and course map**

In the Newcastle social work education course, we have developed an explicit program for the development of critical thinking over the four years of the degree. This program is integrated within the larger curriculum and is presented to students as a 'course map' both on the World Wide Web and in hard copy.

#### ***First year***

- *Learn to locate resources:* Using the library and the internet, students learn to conduct research on a topic or issue and review and integrate resources, applying them to a pertinent need or issue (for example, discrimination, inequality and injustice in keeping with the theme of social justice in the first year).
- *Develop a critical approach to readings and assignments:* Through facilitated class and small group discussion students are encouraged to critically appraise their reading and to critically review media coverage of current events. A criterion of all assignments is to demonstrate critical ability and this is included in feedback to the whole class and to individual students in the group and individual tasks.
- *Explore attitudes and values:* A goal in the first year is to develop a safe group environment in which students' (and teachers') attitudes and values can be

challenged.

- *Distinguish between facts and beliefs:* In the classroom and small groups, as well as in their assignments, students are questioned and challenged to distinguish between fact and belief and required to support their statements of “fact” with evidence.
- *Examine dominant ideologies:* The first year curriculum requires students to recognise dominant ideologies in relation to race, gender and sexual orientation, age, class, and income as part of learning about structures that maintain inequality in Australian society. Dominant discourse on disability, mental health, and addictions is covered in the second year (see below).
- *Think creatively:* Students participate in experiential exercises such as drama or photography to become aware of their creativity. Their tasks are designed for them to be creative, think laterally and allow for many possibilities. Students are encouraged to pursue the development of new ideas, attitudes and knowledge.

### ***Second year***

- *Apply past experience to new learning:* This personal approach to critical thinking involves drawing on past experience in asking questions, expressing doubt and articulating different points of view. Students use their own experiences to explore the power issues inherent in ‘having a voice’ and to consider the way in which their values and beliefs have developed over time. They then reflect on the broad characteristics of their class group, considering its diversity or homogeneity, and how this might influence their discussions as a community of learners.

- *Explore the nature of knowledge or ways of knowing:* Students become familiar with such concepts as ideology, scientific enquiry, values, beliefs, theory, model, assumption, 'truth', intuition, and hypothesis.
- *Begin to compile a theory portfolio:* In this way, students begin to develop a critical understanding of the theories and models commonly used in social work practice.
- *Consider the many audiences that social workers may address in their practice and explore the different genres of communication that may fit a particular audience:* Each of the assignments in the social work degree represents a task that may be expected of a social worker, oral or written, as diverse as government reports and submissions, case notes, referral letters, court reports, newsletters, case presentations, conference papers, public addresses, and advocacy on behalf of clients.
- *Address the role of conflict in critical thinking:* Students learn the features of a sound argument, how to construct a good argument, the art of debate and detecting fallacies of argument. Students are encouraged to engage in conflict about ideas and to distinguish this from interpersonal conflict.
- *Understand that critical thinking is pivotal to learning interpersonal and communication skills:* The giving and receiving of honest feedback, which is fundamental to learning interpersonal skills, is based on a sound critical thinking process. Good listening, which is central to good social work practice, is related to critical thinking; all possibilities need to be heard and considered, before sound decisions can be made. As students begin to learn to work in direct

practice they apply their critical thinking to the client's material: what is relevant, what has priority, and what might have been left unsaid?

- *Apply critical thinking to research and knowledge development in social work practice:* Students conduct a systematic literature review as a means of evaluating current research in an area of practice. Areas of practice covered in second year are child protection, addictions, mental health, and disability.
- *Apply critical thinking to ethical decision-making and moral reasoning in social work practice:* Students learn about ethical reasoning directly through undertaking an ethics subject in the philosophy department. They are introduced to the methodology of moral discussion, which involves understanding and evaluating moral argument, balancing competing interests, and examining moral theories. They examine of issues in social work ethics including utilitarianism and deontology, paternalism and self-determination, social justice, positive discrimination, confidentiality, and relate these to the Social Work Code of Ethics.
- *Undertake the first field placement:* In the second year of the course students have an opportunity to use critical thinking skills in a social work practice environment on their first field education placement. A core part of this learning is experiencing how organisational factors impact on practice and how current welfare or health ideologies and policies shape service delivery.

### ***Third year***

- *Apply critical thinking skills in casework, groupwork and community work within specific practice contexts:* Students learn to incorporate critical thinking



more explicitly in exploring client issues and making judgments and decisions in family intervention, including cases of sexual assault or domestic violence. This requires students to critically apply theories and models to the case situations they encounter as well as to explore, in depth, the assumptions, values and beliefs which form the basis of their reactions and responses.

- *Develop skills in dealing with conflict in groupwork practice:* Students begin to apply their already considerable knowledge of group dynamics to social groupwork and have the opportunity to focus on their role as facilitators in dealing constructively with conflict in groups.
- *Undertake an oral assessment:* Students are required to demonstrate their critical thinking skills by applying theories and justifying their clinical decisions in a case example.
- *Undertake the second field education placement:* In this placement students critically examine an agency's effectiveness in addressing community needs by designing a needs analysis and assets register that provides relevant information for their placement agency.
- *Learn to analyse social policy:* Students apply their critical thinking skills in engaging in argument and debate about current policy issues, as well as practising verbal and written strategies to intervene in the policy arena. Dialogical and multidisciplinary learning is facilitated in a joint course with early childhood education students

### ***Fourth Year***

- *Strengthen and deepen critical thinking skills:* Students undertake in depth work to develop their skills on all levels of practice. They are required to demonstrate these in making practice decisions in case study assignments.
- *Engage in more advanced work on ethical reasoning:* Exploration of ethical issues encountered by students in the field is a focus of the final year and the subject of a major assignment.
- *Learn to evaluate practice:* In their final placement students design an evaluation of social work practice for their placement agency. This requires them to critically examine the roles of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in developing a research proposal.
- *Journal paper:* Students research an area of social work practice, critically reviewing the literature and presenting a well-supported argument based on theory and evidence for a particular approach to social work in a selected field. Over the years some of these papers have been published in reviewed journals.
- *Revisit self-awareness strategies and negotiation skills:* As part of preparing students to make the transition to work, classes spend time focusing on self-care and survival strategies in organisational or team environments.

### **Ongoing evaluation**

Thus far three surveys have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the critical thinking program within the experience-based learning model:

- Second year students were asked to identify features of critical thinking and their skills at the beginning and end of the academic year.

- Seven experienced field educators were asked what they thought critical thinking was and how it was relevant to social work practice.
- A past graduate survey was conducted which identified critical thinking as a core feature of the experience-based model's effectiveness in preparing graduates for social work practice.

### ***Results of Second Year Student Survey 2000***

Two surveys were conducted in second year in 2000, one on the second day of the university year prior to receipt of the critical thinking 'course map', and the second towards the end of the academic year. Students were asked to respond to four questions:

1. What do you believe to be the features of critical thinking?
2. Describe your own critical thinking abilities.
3. What abilities in critical thinking do you aim to develop during your university degree?
4. How do you see critical thinking as relevant to social work practice?

During second year, in addition to receiving a 'course map' which provided an overview of the importance of critical thinking to social work and how it was addressed in the social work program, students undertook a number of sessions specifically to develop their critical thinking ability. Direct reference was made during class activities, such as feedback sessions and group discussion, to the relevance of critical thinking to social work. The second survey, conducted after the students had completed their first field placement, included an additional question: How was critical thinking useful in the

practice environment? In all, 26 surveys were completed in February and 22 in October (eight months later).

Generally there appeared to be little change in students' perceptions of critical thinking from the beginning to the end of the second year course. Students tended to equate critical thinking with scientific thinking like analysing, objectivity, and identifying bias, and consequently focused on written material, specifically reading and viewing the media critically. There was little mention of creativity and lateral thinking, the application of critical thinking to practice in decision-making, problem solving and innovation, or the relationship of critical thinking to working through ethical dilemmas. No students identified group work as developing their critical thinking abilities.

In rating their own critical thinking abilities, most students felt much more confident about their critical thinking ability at the second survey and thought that their critical thinking skills were improving. However, they still placed emphasis on critical skills in reading and processing information, and on identifying bias. So while students had become more aware of critical thinking and understood it intellectually, they remained unsure of its application to practice.

However, in the second survey, when students were asked to identify the relevance of critical thinking to social work practice, they were more able to connect critical thinking with assessment and intervention processes. In responding to this question, many students related critical thinking to policy and organisational analysis.

### ***Field educators' perceptions of critical thinking***

Seven experienced field educators were asked to identify core features of critical thinking and its relevance to social work practice. Like the students, the field educators

also identified the scientific reasoning and argumentation aspects of critical thinking: identifying and analysing issues, identifying assumptions and bias, observation and perception, and accountability for practice decisions. They also related critical thinking to communication: reading and conveying information through oral and written communication. Some field educators also connected critical thinking with the broad values of social work, such as achieving social change, and with undertaking the tasks of social work within a set of principles, including values, ethics and theories. Field educators saw critical thinking as involving the development of awareness of one's own values and biases, and being able to work with the different perspectives of client, agency, community, and worker. Finally, field educators were aware of, but not always clear about, the role of critical thinking in their day to day practice, in identifying, thinking about, developing and evaluating a range of options in clinical assessments, decision-making and judgment, questioning and listening, reflecting, discussing, and challenging.

However, field educators were not very confident in their ability to help students develop critical thinking skills and did not seem to recognise that the process of supervision and modelling their own decision-making in practice would be important features of this. Field educators saw the university as supporting them to assist students in developing their critical thinking ability through seminars, providing supervision to field educators, creating opportunities to meet and exchange ideas with other field educators, disseminating information on new writing and resources in social work, providing examples of the types of questions to ask students, being clear about the expectations field educators should have of students, and providing opportunities for

field educators to become more aware of and improve their own critical thinking abilities.

### ***Graduate Survey 2001***

In 2001 a survey was conducted of graduates of the course from 1995-1999, to examine their perceptions of the effectiveness of experience-based learning in preparing them for social work practice. A total of 167 questionnaires was mailed and 46 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 27.5%. Unexpectedly, respondents perceived critical thinking, including creativity and lateral thinking, as having had a lasting effect and being a major strength of the experience-based learning model in preparing them for practice, along with groupwork, field experience and the practical focus of the course. Although most students commented that critical thinking had been a major strength, a small number thought that the course had been ideologically biased, over-emphasising perspectives such as feminism and structuralism:

A strength of the course was the diverse range of assignments that encouraged and strengthened creativity and lateral thinking.

Even though it was difficult I think the group work, role-plays with videos and class interaction with the other students has helped me enormously. I find I can be very creative in a work environment and am able to think laterally thanks to this grounding.

The course felt very gruelling but in retrospect this was probably a strength (although it didn't feel that way at the time). I felt that if you survived 4 years of social work at Newcastle you could survive any work place.

## **Conclusion**

Evaluations conducted thus far, especially with second year students and field educators, would seem to suggest that critical thinking is still associated with a scientific view of the world, with logical, analytical and value-free thinking. The notion of objectivity as 'detached observation' still predominates with undergraduate students, as though one can remove oneself from what one is studying or trying to understand. Notions of critical thinking in the social constructionist paradigm emphasised in this program include awareness of one's own values, ideologies and history and the way in which they influence understanding and meaning construction, learning through dialogue with other students and staff, learning through practice experience and feedback, creativity and ethical reasoning. However, these were not at the forefront of the undergraduate students' ideas about critical thinking even though they were made explicit in the classroom, in fieldwork and in the 'course map'.

It would appear that the social work program still has a long way to go to help students make connections to critical thinking in their practice, seeing critical thinking as a constructive process related to social work values, and to see and understand the moral implications of the problems and issues they confront. This shows how hard it is, particularly for students, to live with the uncertainties and ambiguities of social work practice, to juxtapose contradictory positions, and to think gray rather than black and white. Helping students to recognise the role of critical thinking in practice decision-

making and is likely to be best achieved through their field education experiences. Field educators therefore have a pivotal role to play in making students aware of applying critical thinking to practice. It is, however, heartening to know that when graduates look back at their learning, they appreciate critical thinking as integral to their practice of social work and see it as a strength of Newcastle's experience-based learning model. Their comments show the lasting effect of critical thinking on their clinical work in their ability to work creatively and think laterally. However, thorough, ongoing, repeated evaluation is needed to draw any conclusive findings regarding the effectiveness of the Newcastle model in preparing social workers for practice and in helping them to think critically.

Social constructionism is engendering a massive paradigm shift or rather a cultural change which runs counter to ordinary (easy fix) thinking in social work where everything can be explained – put into categories or boxes. Critical thinking, rather than claiming objectivity, is value-laden thinking – much more than common sense. We engage with the world and with others and our judgments, conclusions, ideas, and opinions flow from these interactions – never from a standpoint of detached objectivity. The importance is therefore to make the values, judgments and decision-making explicit, rather than to claim that they are not there and to see critical thinking as crucial to the process of constructing knowledge, meaning and understanding.

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**Figure 1: The Newcastle model**

