


The Open University

Developing a questioning approach:
the experiences of some students
following a Foundation Degree in
Early Years at the Open University


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**Background: Developing the
Early Years Workforce in England**

- The government has committed to the reform of the children's workforce through 'a transformational reform agenda designed to improve life chances for all and reduce inequalities in our society' (DfES, 2006, p.2.)
- This agenda acknowledges that increasing the skills and competence of the workforce is critical to providing quality provision for young children and their families

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**Background: Developing the Early Years
Workforce in England continued...**

- This route to a more professional workforce includes Early Years Sector Endorsed Foundation Degrees (EYSEFD), established in 2002 and re-launched in 2008 and
- A new role of Early Years Professional (EYP) to lead practice across the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum

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The Early Years Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree

- A work related Higher Education qualification which integrates academic study with work-based learning and reflects employers' needs.
- Since 2008 training providers must meet new criteria for sector endorsement which includes:
 - membership of a national network of SEFDEY providers
 - active employer engagement
 - content must cover the EYFS, reflect current government policy, up to date practice and meet external benchmarks
 - students must be in paid employment or a voluntary placement
 - FD must support progression towards graduate EYP Status

The Early Years Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree – recent changes

- Prior to 2008 guidance on content and delivery for providers was set out in a 'Statement of Requirement' (DfES, 2001) developed in consultation with government and key stakeholders. This included specified learning outcomes and advance practice requirements
- The 'Statement of Requirement' provided a regulatory framework
- Thus EYSEFDs could be seen to fit Moss' (2003) description of a 'technicist' model of learning
- However providers were free to interpret these requirements and Reflective Practice was (and is) seen as a key focus (Cable et. al. 2007)

The Early Years Foundation Degree at the Open University

- The Open University Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree in Early Years commenced in 2003 and is offered part-time by supported distance learning.
- It was developed within the above external constraints
 - since 2008 more flexibility has become possible.
- Students are from a range of early years settings including home based, teaching assistants in schools and Children's Centres.
- Underpinning knowledge from the 60 credits of 'knowledge based' courses at Levels 1 and 2 is drawn on in the 60 credits of work-based learning and study at levels 1 and 2.

Developing Reflective Practice within a Regulatory Framework

- The work based learning courses enable students to document and present practice evidence against the core learning outcomes
- The courses are framed around the notion of 'reflective practice' (Schön 1987) and aim to enable students to question why and how they undertake aspects of their practice
- Evidence is documented in a **Practice Evidence File**:
 - a portfolio of annotated evidence against the learning outcomes
 - provides the source material for their analytical writing.

The Reflective Practice Cycle

- In the first work based learning course students are introduced to a structured, four stage, Reflective Practice Cycle (RPC)
- Supports them in 3 three core areas:
 - Working with parents and other professionals;
 - Promoting children's learning and development
 - Promoting children's rights and child protection.

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The Reflective Practice Cycle continued...

- Stage 1 – Thinking about practice
- Stage 2 – Exploring practice
- Stage 3 – Reflecting on practice
- Stage 4 – Documenting evidence

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Reflective practice cycle continued...

Stage	Questions to Explore
1	What do I know and believe about early years practice? What do I know about my practice? What do I want to find out?
2	How can I collect data to help me answer my key question? How can I organise the data to help me describe my practice more objectively?
3	To what extent does my new description fit with what I thought my practice was like? How does my new description compare with my knowledge, values and beliefs about practice? How have my knowledge, values and beliefs changed as a result of my investigation and reflection?
4	To what extent have I met the learning outcomes for this theme? What evidence can I use to show this, and how should I present it?

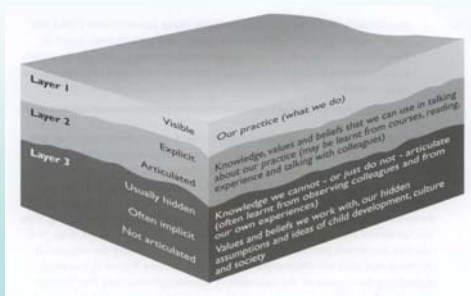
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The Three Layer Model of Professional Practice

- Enables students to visualise the moving interactions between their day-to-day practice and how their knowledge, values and beliefs influence the ways in which they work with children
- Supports their understanding of the process of reflection.
- Compulsory computer mediated discussion between tutors and students enables a 'community of practice' to develop (Wenger, 1998).

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The Three Layer Model of Professional Practice



A study of students' reflective accounts

- 63 reflective accounts written as the final assignment for the first work-based learning course during the academic year 2005 were analysed
- Examples of reflection relating to four emerging themes were identified:
 - Validation or confirmation of practice;
 - Challenges to or changes in values and beliefs;
 - Changes in thinking and understanding;
 - Changes in practice.

Validation of existing ideas, understandings, approaches and ways of working

I became interested in the Reggio Emilia approach which I found supported my own beliefs. I have always believed that the starting point for plans should be the individual child. This interest has led to me booking on to two Reggio Emilia seminar evenings. I look forward to using these to help me develop how I plan with children.

Challenges to values and beliefs

I began [the course] relying heavily upon my own observations to assess a child's personal, social and emotional (PSE) development. However, by using the reflective practice cycle ... I reflected upon how I may improve assessment procedures to gain a more 'holistic' view of the child. The evidence I gathered reflects a change in my practice, recognising the importance of seeking the parent's and colleagues' observations to gain a clearer insight into the needs of the child.

Changes in thinking and understanding

'Professional thinking includes the ability to reflect on practice and to make informed decisions through well conceived examination and analysis of pedagogy'. (Moyles et. al. 2002, p.5)

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Changes in thinking and understanding continued...

I was able to promote Jake's learning by working alongside him and by giving him appropriate advice which enabled him to build his tower...in socio-cultural terms I was able to 'scaffold' Jake's learning through the 'zone of proximal development' learning by sharing my 'expertise' of placing the blocks sideways which enabled him to build a steady tower, as this was something he could not do on his own.

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Changes in Practice

Moyles (2001, p.89) suggests professionalism is related to thinking about facets of one's role and that *'it requires high levels of professional knowledge coupled with self-esteem and self-confidence'*.

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Changes in Practice continued...

[The activity] assisted me in clarifying what rights I believe children should have, my list developed further as I became increasingly familiar with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. I began thinking about my practice and how I promote children's rights and inclusion within my setting... It also provided the opportunity for me to reflect on the decisions I believe children should have a say in about their own lives...The children were being given the opportunity to make some choices...but I did feel this was an area that could be improved on...I have stopped the children working in set groups, they can choose who they want to work with...I have also begun to try free-flow inside/outside play/work.

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Summary

These accounts:

- Provide some powerful examples of the impact of using the RPC on students' practice
- Show students' willingness to engage with new ideas, to explore their values and beliefs, to try new ways of working with children, parents and other professionals and to articulate the changes that are taking place
- Were overwhelmingly positive about the process of reflection, even if workplace constraints meant they felt they were able to effect little change.

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Researching practice

- The second level 2 work-based learning course builds on and extends notions of reflection and reflexivity
- Students research their own practice
- Emphasis on developing the ability to listen to the 'voice of the child'
- Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001)
- The course supports students in further exploring different theoretical perspectives
- Socio-cultural theory (Rogoff, 1998, 2003) and interpretations of socio-cultural perspectives in practice (Reggio Emilia, Te Whāriki)
- Ecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

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Four linked investigations:

- What is it like to be a child in my setting?
 - Children's environments
 - Supporting children's personal, social and emotional development
 - Co-ordinating and evaluating the curriculum for children's care, learning and development
 - Promoting participation and inclusion.

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Data collection and analysis

Qualitative research with 48 students from first cohort to complete Foundation degree

- Questionnaires completed by 24 students
- Interviews with 10 self selected students
- Postings to an on-line course evaluation forum
- Interviews with 4 tutors and 4 employers
- Analysis by question and emerging themes

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Emerging themes

Transformational journey

- Changes in thinking and understanding
- Changes in values and beliefs
- Changes in thinking about practice
- Changes in relationships

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Views of the child

I am more open minded about approaches and the way that perhaps.... 'Children are beings not becomings' is one of the quotes we had on the course and that they are - they have developed as a character they are a person in their own right, they are not something that we are just constantly pushing things into, they are developing their own thoughts, they are expanding their knowledge and building on what they have done and that knowledge includes a greater community than the one of the school community, their peer community, their family community, their wider social community as well in all those things that they are building into.

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GD3

Views and beliefs

I believed that the environment my setting provided for the children to be effective for their care, learning and development; my research enabled me to see how disempowering the environment is for some children, and how little 'agency' they have. I was also surprised by how much the implemented curriculum impacts upon the environment...I now recognise how my own views of the child 'filter' the curriculum.

GD1
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Thinking about practice

I am a lot more aware of how what they say or the picture that they project can be misinterpreted just from my own thoughts and feelings, this thing about making assumptions based on knowledge of obviously childcare and development, but based on my own knowledge rather than what they are actually saying or what they are trying to say. So it is not so much the interaction, you know I physically do something different when I am interacting with children or I do it in a different way, it is more what I - the way that I interpret what's coming back - if you see what I mean?

GD5

Slide 26

GD3 Student interview: S.7
Gill Goodliff, 28/06/2007

Slide 27

GD1 ECA data from S. Bottomley needs code
Gill Goodliff, 28/06/2007

Slide 28

GD5 Student interview: S4
Gill Goodliff, 28/06/2007



Thinking about practice - Scaffolding learning

That will probably come down to the way I challenge and question them, for example a couple of weeks ago a young boy had made a helicopter in the construction area, but the propellers did not go round so I sort of said, 'oh I wonder how we can make the propellers go round, do you think you could have a look' and he went off and came back having made - fixed in a new piece that made the propellers go round. So it is challenging them and encouraging them to extend their learning without specific question and answering.

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Interactions with children

I haven't jumped in as quickly whereas before I might ask the question and not necessarily listen to what the children are saying. I kind of give them time to answer now and think and when they are going 'um ah' I realise that is their thinking time and also I wouldn't jump in and take over play where I was a bit guilty of that before in the home corner and I would say, 'oh make me a cup of tea, why don't we do this and why don't we do that?', I am much more kind of sitting and listening to what is going on and maybe making gentle suggestions as opposed to actually taking the whole thing over.

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Interactions with other professionals

I am able to go out quite confidently amongst other foundation stage practitioners in different forums, for example last week I was at a moderation meeting over the foundation stage curriculum and I am confident enough now to be able to go in with those sort of people and know that the knowledge, that the things that I am saying are backed up by practice and theory.

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Communication with other professionals

I feel more equipped to communicate clearly with other professionals on a range of issues- particularly those viewed as 'more expert' than myself. I can question more effectively.

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The perspective of others

My research ... challenged the view of the practitioner as most knowledgeable and made me reflect on how I can build on shared understandings with child and parent.

From talking to the child in my research I became aware that as part of my leadership role I need to listen and acknowledge the validity of the child's views in planning and provision.

GD4

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Discussion

Evidence of transformation through participation in study
– elements of an ongoing process of reflection on their own practice in supporting children's learning

- Identifying values, beliefs
- Examining practice and relationships
- Linking knowledge and understanding to practice
- Drawing on theory and research
- Developing pedagogical knowledge and practice

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Concluding thoughts

Through researching their practice these early years practitioners have:

- been challenged to 'stop and think' about their role;
- explored their values and beliefs;
- articulated how they have moved through to new understandings of the child and their role in supporting learning,
- discovered new ways of working with children, parents and other practitioners

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Conclusion continued...

- These student reflections indicate that courses of study (developed within regulatory frameworks) can help to develop reflective, questioning practitioners.
- We do not see ourselves as passive recipients of the process of workforce reform (Osgood, 2006) who deliver pre-specified curricula but active agents who have developed courses which acknowledge the complex work that early years practitioners do and enable them to question their own thinking, understanding and practice.

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GD4 ECA text: J.Topping needs code
Gill Goodliff, 28/06/2007

Conclusion continued...

At the end of the course, I can see how I am more secure in my confidence as a reflective practitioner. This has enhanced my professionalism which makes me feel good about my practice.

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