REFLECTIVE LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN THE SUBSTANCE ABUSE FIELD
INTRODUCTION

• Aristotle once said: "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them."

• Reflective learning can be described as being more concerned with “who am I” and link this with “what I do”.

• It is thus being mindful of oneself during or after a learning experience.

• Reflective learning is very much part of social work education.

(Heron, 2005; Johns, 2010)
• Dewey (1933) introduced the concept of reflection and viewed it as an important component of learning and necessary to incorporate experiences into an existing framework of knowledge, while taking into consideration a learner’s life experience as well as present observations.

• Several authors claim that reflective learning is a very effective way for students to learn as students learn to discover themselves and are able to personally engage into their studies.

(Dyment and O’Connel, 2011; Johns, 2010; Lam, Wong and Leung, 2006)
• Reflective learning can occur in a variety of fields such as teaching, nursing and social work.
• Overlapping terms such as deep learning, critical reflection, transformative learning and action research are also used to describe reflective learning.
• The journey of reflection is not an easy one and often uncomfortable.
• This journey however could be a liberating one where shackles of complacency and ritualised patterns can be removed.

(White, Fook and Gardner, 2006)
• Clarity is needed on what reflection is and those who claim to practice reflective teaching should ensure that they indeed do so and that it is not merely analyze a learning experience.

• It is also of importance to ensure that students know and understand what is expected of them regarding reflection work, as this is nowadays very much part of tertiary students’ curricula.

(Cowan, 2014; John, 2010)
DEFINITION

• Reflective learning can be defined as “...those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations.”

• Learning is thus an active and developmental process and the responsibility of the individual.

• What we learn becomes part of our body of knowledge that we draw upon in future reflective observations.

• Learning can be viewed as a cumulative process.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

• Substance abuse poses a major threat to the well-being of society, families and individuals.
• Escalating problems associated with alcohol and other drugs (AOD) are evident world-wide.
• Substance abuse affects all spheres of intervention such as child neglect, teenagers, domestic violence and gerontology.
• Drugs are classified into certain categories according to their legal status, chemical composition or the route of taking the drug.
• There are also non-drug addictions, referred to as process addictions such as gambling, internet, sex or eating.

(Carlson, Matto, Smith & Eversman, 20016; Fisher & Harris, 2013; Riger & Bennet, 20140
REFLECTION IN THE SUBSTANCE ABUSE FIELD

• In the field of substance abuse reflective learning is of utmost importance as students’ attitudes toward substance abuse could influence their dealing with substance abuse clients.

• Reflective learning may enhance student’s learning experience regarding Substance Abuse.

• This journey of knowing oneself better is an important journey for social workers who work in the Substance Abuse field as it would enhance the helping process.

(Fisher and Harris, 2013; Stein, 2008)
• In the Substance Abuse field people who seek help are often vulnerable and it might be beneficial to them if they receive help from a social workers who can identify and respond effectively with them.
• Reflective learning is one way how social work students in the Substance Abuse field can effectively combine the “who I am” to the “what I do”.
• This imply taking a close look at their own lives and experience how difficult it is to abstain from something for a period of time, as their potential substance abuse clients need to abstain from alcohol or other drugs for a life time.

(Fisher and Harris, 2013)
TERMINOLOGY

• **Addiction** occurs when an individual loses control over the intake of substances. There are increased tolerance levels and withdrawal symptoms.

• **Cravings** refers to a person’s longing to use a drug after he has stopped using it.

• **Triggers** can be any stressful situation or painful memory that might lead to use of the drug again.

• **Substitute drugs** are often used to replace the current drug of choice.

• **Relapse** is a return to uncontrolled alcohol/drug or non-drug use following a period of abstinence.

(Fisher & Harris, 2013)
RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

• It would benefit Social Work profession to explore how reflective learning can strengthen students’ learning experiences especially in the field of substance abuse.

• Although there is a substantial amount of literature in the Social Work profession about reflection, not much has been written specifically in the Substance Abuse field and this study could make a contribution in this regard.

(Bozalek, 2009; Dyment, et.al., 2011; Stein, 2003)
The research question of this study was: “What are the experiences of final-year social work students when abstaining from a certain aspect/habit/substance for three weeks in order to reflect on possibly harmful patterns in their own lives, and to gain new understanding and appreciation for life-long abstinence?”
GOAL

• The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of final-year social work students at the University of Stellenbosch when abstaining from any aspect/habit/substance for three weeks in order to reflect on possibly harmful patterns in their own lives, and to gain new understanding and appreciation of life-long abstinence.
• A qualitative approach was proposed, as there was a degree of flexibility in this study and not necessarily clearly set out steps were followed.

• In qualitative studies data are also collected from a relatively small number of participants and the data is then organised.

• Movement between deductive and inductive logic of reasoning applied in this study

• Data were collected in the field (in this case the lecture room) where the participants (the students) experienced a certain process (to abstain from something for three weeks).

(De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport, 2011; (Southern & Devlin, 2010).
• A descriptive and exploratory design were used in this study.

• Descriptive designs present a picture of specific details of a situation, in this case the reflective journey of the students in this particular exercise.

• Exploratory designs are used to gain insight into a certain phenomenon, in this case the students’ experiences of this reflective process.

(De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport, 2011)
ASSIGNMENT

• The following exercise was given to fourth year social work students at the University of Stellenbosch:

  • Identify an aspect/habit/substance in your life which you feel you can’t do without, but would like to give up. Try to abstain from it for 3 weeks.

  • The purpose of this exercise is to encourage critical thinking about dependency and for you to experience how challenging it is to abstain from something that is part of your daily life.

  • Keep a journal of this experience in order to give feedback at the end of this period.
• Provide feedback on this process.
• Did you manage to abstain from this aspect/habit/substance for three weeks?
• What did you find challenging in this exercise?
• How did it help you to gain more insight into the field of substance abuse?
DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

• The data that were collected presented a “thick description”.
• Data analysis was done by categorising the data into different themes or categories.
• Purposive sampling was used and specifically total population sampling as the whole population, namely the final-year social work students at the University of Stellenbosch participated in the study.

(De Vos, et al., 2011; Freeman, 1996; Maxwell, 2009:36)
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

• Ethical clearance was obtained.
• The research can be regarded as low risk where participants might have experienced discomfort or inconvenience.
• The goal of the research was explained to the participants.
• Informed consent was also obtained.
• Identifying details of the participants were not used in the research.
• Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research.
• The data are kept in a safe place.

(De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport, 2011)
FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS:

• Forty-nine final-year social work students took part in this study.
• Forty-six (94%) were female and three (6%) male.
• This correlates with the tendency world-wide that most social workers are female.
• The age of the students varied between 21 and 32 years.

(Dahle, 2012)
THEMES

1. Abstinence from **Depressants** such as alcohol
2. Abstinence from **Stimulants** such as Tobacco
3. Abstinence from **Opioids** such as pain-killers
4. Abstinence from **Food** such as bread and sugar
5. Abstinence from the **Social Media** such as Facebook
6. Abstinence from **Bad Habits**
THEME 1: DEPRESSANTS

• Two of the participants (4%) indicated they wanted to stop drinking excessively.

• “I am going to try to leave binge drinking. This happens over week ends and also at nights when I work as a bartender. I did a pregnancy test a couple of days ago which came out positive....

• ...This helped me to stop the binge drinking, as I want the best for my baby...

• ...This is however not easy, as my body still craves after the alcohol. I also quit my job as bar tender, but this means I do not have any income...” Laura
• “I decided to give up alcohol for three weeks. I chose alcohol because it is something that I have become quite dependent on for fun, socialising and to relax. I managed to refrain from alcohol for only a few days before drinking again. I work at a bar... ...Although I managed to abstain from binge drinking episodes for three weeks, I did feel disappointed in myself for not being able to completely abstain from alcohol.

• From my experience, I feel that if an addict is surrounded by people and an environment which advocate the use of a substance, they will struggle...

• I gained better understanding of what it is like to try not to live with something that I am used to having. I have more appreciation towards recovering addicts...” Sophie
• It is significant that these students seemed to have developed insight into the harmful effects of excessive use of alcohol.

• Laura could identify with cravings. She also realised the danger alcohol posed to the unborn baby.

• The role of people and the environment was also pointed out by Sophie.

(Fisher & Harris, 2013; Hitzeroth, 2010)
THEME 2: STIMULANTS

Fifteen of the 49 participants (31%) indicated that they wanted to reduce their intake of stimulants.

Eight of the 15 students (53%) wanted to reduce their caffeine intake.

Seven (47%) wanted to quit or reduce smoking.
Caffeine

“I drank between eight and ten cups of coffee per day. I am so used to coffee that it doesn’t affect my sleep pattern. The first day was not too bad. I substituted tea for coffee. Towards the evening I developed a headache... Smelling the coffee was a trigger for me. The third day I relapsed. This exercise gave me new respect for person’s who struggle with addiction. Dawn
• Although coffee is not as harmful as other more dangerous substances, Dawn indicated how difficult it was to give it up.
• Caffeine withdrawal symptoms include headaches.

(West & Roderique-Davies, 2008)
Tobacco

“When I was still at school my friends and I decided to experiment with the hookah pipe. It was fun to see how the water bubbles...

...Little did I know of the dangers of the hookah pipe. I want to give up this bad habit. It was very difficult, as most of my friends still use it...

...I managed to abstain from it for three weeks and it helped me to gain insight in the field of substance abuse.” Judy
“I decided to give up smoking for three weeks. I have tried before, but did not succeed...

...I didn’t smoke for four days. When I met with my friend, in a social setting, I smoked again...I relapsed.

...I do not smoke so much anymore...

...I am disappointed in myself, and see now how difficult it is to give up an addiction.” Maxine
• The influence of friends were referred to and how difficult it is to give up something, while your friends are still doing it.
• This correlates with literature that friends can cause a person to relapse.

(Dodge, Krantz & Kenny, 2010)
THEME 3: OPIOIDS

Three of the participants (6%) indicated and acknowledged that they experienced problems with opioids reflected by the following excerpts.

“There is something in my personal life that has a huge impact on me and that is pain-killers...

...I developed headaches a couple of years ago. The medicine I used also calmed me down...

...I don’t need a prescription for it. I realised that I am addicted...

...The first week was the most difficult...

...My friend was a huge support. I have managed to leave the pills for three weeks and am very proud of myself.” Leila
“I have problems in my personal life and as a result I struggle to sleep at night. I started to take sleeping tablets...

...I got addicted and started to use them as soon as I feel stressed...

...The first couple of days were the most difficult and I had headaches and longed for my pills. I stayed awake at night and felt depressed. I was ashamed of myself...

...I have learned not to judge people who are addicted.”

Rita
• It is noteworthy that all three participants indicated that they were addicted to pain-killers.
• One of the participants did go for treatment before she completed this exercise.
• Literature points out an increase of addiction to pain-killers.

(King, 2014; Stannard, 2012)
Theme 4: Food

Eighteen participants (37%) mentioned that they wanted to change some or other eating habit.

“\textit{I am going to try to give up sugar for three weeks. Only when I tried to give it up, I realised I was far more dependent on it than I had assumed...} 

\textit{...I realised that most foods contain sugar, even my favourite: a glass of wine at night...} 

\textit{...I only managed to abstain from sugar for three days and realise how difficult it is to break a bad habit.” Zelda}
“I am going to give up junk food. This was a challenging experience. The first two weeks were difficult as I experienced cravings. At the end of the second week it was my friend’s birthday party and I relapsed...

...My roommate was a great support as she also decided to stop eating junk food...

...This experience helped me to realise how difficult it is to stop an addiction, especially if you have been doing it for years.” Christine
• Although the 18 participants did not suffer from any serious eating disorder, they all indicated the difficulty trying to abstain from certain foods and how difficult is to break destructive habits.

• Research emphasises the hard road to recovery from an eating disorder.

(Yiend, Parnes, Shepherd, Ross and Cooper, 2014).
THEME 5: SOCIAL MEDIA

• Eight of the 49 participants indicated they wanted to abstain from using social media as shown below:

• “The thing I decided to give up for three weeks is Facebook. During the three weeks, I did not go on Facebook once...

• ...I removed the application from my cell phone and removed the bookmark in the web browsers. I did find it difficult, but then substituted Twitter and Instagram for Facebook.

• ...This could also happen with substance abusers, replacing a previous addiction with a different one.” Melody
“A **personal addiction** of mine is Facebook. Other people’s lives look more interesting and better than my own...

...Facebook brought **emotions** in me such as jealousy, discontent, self-pity and depression. I realised that most of the photo’s on Facebook look better than the real life...

...As a **substitute** I decided to rather read News24...

...This exercise was very difficult for me. I realise how **difficult it must be for someone with a dependency to give up a drug for the rest of his life.**” Anny
• Both Melody and Anny tried to substitute other social media for Facebook.
• It is insightful to read Anny’s grasp of the negative feelings she experienced with Facebook and that Facebook is not real life.
• This correlates with research into internet addiction.

(Orchard, Fullwood, Morris & Galbraith, 2014)
THEME 6: BAD HABITS

• Three of the participants (6%) identified bad habits as aspects they wanted to change.

• My procrastination is most destructive. I gained more insight into how difficult it is to stop destructive patterns. I did not manage to give up procrastination completely. I lack the necessary self-control... I also gained insight into the multi-faceted nature of a problem or an addiction. Leah
• Literature suggests that temptations present different challenges to good intentions and some adjustments and behaviour modification need to take place in order to break a bad habit.

(Quinn, Pascoe, Wood & Neal, 2010)
CONCLUSIONS

• Reflection regarding the challenges of substance abuse played a significant part in the student’s learning experiences.

• Students also struggle with some addictive forming habits in their own lives.

• Reflecting on these habits they wanted to change helped them to gain insight into how difficult it is to abstain from substances for a life time.
• A significant number of them pointed out they needed to change some harmful patterns in their own lives.
• Five participants (10%) indicated their struggle with harmful substances.
• Two of them (4%) remarked on their struggle with alcohol.
• Three of them (6%) revealed their addiction to opioids.
RECOMMENDATIONS

• FOR PRACTICE:
  • Professionals in the substance abuse field should be afforded the opportunity to reflect on their own lives and possible harmful habits.
  • The nature and scope of substance abuse should not be underestimated.
• FOR EDUCATION:
• Reflective learning be utilised optimally to help student engage in their studies.
• Students be enabled to reflect on any possible harmful or addictive patterns in their own lives.
• Reflection on the difficulties of life-long abstinence be encouraged.
• FOR RESEARCH:
• More research be conducted into reflective learning in the substance abuse field.
• Multi-disciplinary research be undertaken in reflection and of substance abuse.


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