

# Teaching for Transfer: Transfer of Learning in Social Work Education

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This article develops themes that emerged at a conference workshop on social work education held in York, England in 1999. The workshop deliberately set out to model the process of teaching transfer of learning by asking participants to consider a recent personal experience of learning something new. Participants were invited to focus on what had helped them in the process of learning this new skill/job/ or hobby, and what had hindered them. Workshop participants discussed their experience with others in the group and, with the support and direction of the workshop facilitator, significant themes were identified, categorised, compared and contrasted with broader evidence from empirical research and theoretical insights into the transfer of learning process. The material for the workshop came out of a study of transfer of learning carried out in 1998 (Cree et al 1998), and developmental work for a new edited book on the subject (Cree and Macaulay 2000 forthcoming).

## Introduction

Transfer of learning has become a central construct in social work. Those of us working in social work education and practice confront the reality of an ever-shifting world, where the scale and pace of change seems to increase year by year. Organisational change, changes in legislation and policy, changes in procedures and practices are the norm in social work, and, of course, the profession is itself characterised by diversity. It would be wholly unreasonable to expect courses to simulate the range of service user groups, settings and experiences that social workers encounter in their daily work. Transfer of learning creates the possibility of coping with the impossible - if we can only transfer our learning from one situation to another, then we will be able to act confidently and appropriately in the diverse and changing circumstances of practice.

Diploma in Social Work regulations in the UK recognise the importance of transfer of learning and ask that students show evidence of transfer of knowledge, skills and values in writing and in practice throughout their programme of study. The requirements state:

“Evidence of conceptualisation, critical analysis, reflection and transfer of knowledge, skills and values is essential for the award of DipSW, and students must be required to provide this evidence in written work and in practice throughout the programme.” (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work 1995: p.17).

And again...

“To qualify for the award of the DipSW, students must demonstrate at final assessment that they have achieved the six core competences of social work, through provision of evidence that they have met practice and value requirements, acquired and applied knowledge, reflected upon and critically analysed their practice and transferred knowledge, skills and values in practice.” (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work 1995: p.47).

But what is transfer of learning? And how can social work educators teach students to transfer their learning? Our study of transfer of learning was commissioned by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) and the Scottish Office in order to investigate these issues in relation to both education and professional practice. The study involved a review of literature on transfer of learning, drawing from the fields of social work, nursing studies and education. We also interviewed key people who had written about transfer of learning, as well as a small number of social work practice teachers and lecturers/tutors who were able to contribute their understandings of transfer of learning in practice. The end result was a report, *Transfer of Learning. A Study*, which considers what transfer of learning is, what facilitates and inhibits transfer of learning, and how transfer of learning might be evidenced and assessed (Cree et al., 1998). The report also includes some tools that might be used for facilitating and evidencing transfer of learning. Our recent work has developed more practical

examples of how transfer of learning might be facilitated in educational settings (Cree & Macaulay, 2000 forthcoming).

### The structure and organisation of the conference workshop

Experience in leading previous workshops on transfer of learning told us that transfer of learning is a subject that social work educators (practice teachers and college lecturers) are very familiar with, yet find difficult to define. A common view has been expressed that “we all know what it is, but it is hard to put into words”. Because of this, at the York Conference held in 1999 a definition was offered to workshop participants at the outset (see below). Following this, participants were invited to discuss with others their own recent experience of transferring learning, focusing on what helped and what hindered the learning process. The outcomes from this discussion were displayed on flipcharts and the workshop facilitator then sought to make connections between the points raised and findings from empirical research and educational theory. In this way the workshop ‘modelled’ how we might teach for transfer, starting with prior experience, drawing out themes, then making connections with broader evidence and enquiry. The choice of this approach demonstrates the reality that transfer of learning, although at one level automatic and subconscious, is also something which can be ‘taught’. As Nisbet and Shucksmith write:

“Teaching for transfer implies bringing the transferable elements - concepts and principles - into consciousness, and pointing out their more general applicability.” (1986: p.21)

### Defining transfer of learning

The most straightforward and inclusive definition of transfer of learning we have discovered is “prior learning affecting new learning or performance” (Marini & Genereux, 1995: p.2). Marini and

Genereux unpack transfer of learning further by indicating that there are three main elements involved in transfer of learning, learner, task and context:

“The new learning or performance can differ from original learning in terms of the task involved (as when students apply what they have learned on practice problems to solving a new problem), and/ or the context involved (as when students apply their classroom learning to performing tasks at home or work). The basic elements involved in transfer are thus the learner, the instructional tasks (including learning materials and practice problems), the instructional context (the physical and social setting, including the instruction and support provided by the teacher, the behavior [sic] of other students, and the norms and expectations inherent in the setting), the transfer task, and the transfer context.”

(1995: p.2).

The rest of this article will examine how transfer of learning may be facilitated and hindered in relation to each of these elements.

### The learner

Workshop participants identified a number of factors relating to them as individuals that were important in their transfer of learning.

As we will discuss, all the subjects identified above are explicit in the wider literature on transfer of learning.

### Previous experience

Past experiences of education and employment have a major impact on the learner’s capacity to transfer learning (Billett, 1994; Cust, 1995). Because learning is both active and individual, knowledge and experience are constructed and represented in ways determined by personal dispositions and by personal and cultural histories (Billett 1994, Boud and Miller 1996). Students

What helped?	What hindered?
Motivation	Lack of motivation
Positive attitude	Low self-concept
Past experience/past experience of transfer	Lack of knowledge
A positive attitude	Fear of failure
Patience	Learning style
Necessity	Low priority
Self-confidence/confidence of others	Doubt
Enjoyment	Frustration

whose previous experience of education was valuing and successful are more likely therefore to approach their next educational experience with self-confidence and with a trust and confidence in others. In contrast, those who felt disparaged or diminished in the past may fear failure and be unwilling to take risks in learning something new. Similarly, those who were well-supported and able to ask questions in their previous employment situation are much better equipped to face the challenge of new learning.

While previous experience may seem to be an important influence on learning transfer for the reasons stated, constructivist theories of learning stress the fundamental importance of experience. Learning is seen as an active process. Learners “strive for understanding and competence on the basis of their personal experience... old knowledge is always revised, reorganised and even reinterpreted in order to reconcile it with new input” (Cust, 1995: pp.280-281). Teachers and facilitators of learning must provide their students with the opportunity to examine the links between their past and present experience so that they can comprehend their own ways of understanding. They must also provide students with the time and space to explore the internal models and representations (conscious and subconscious) which they use in everyday life. Transfer of learning, the ultimate aim in all teaching, can only be achieved if these models and representations constructed from the individual’s own experience, are first acknowledged and then examined through a process of reflection (Gould, 1993; Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1983).

### ***Motivation and attitudes***

Studies of transfer of learning demonstrate that the attitude of the learner towards the learning task is fundamental: transfer of learning is facilitated when the learner is motivated and open to learn. Students have to want to learn, and no amount of enthusiasm by others (lecturers, practice teachers or tutors), organisation or direction will alter that (Bennett et al., 1994; Brown & Atkins, 1993). Motivation may differ according to the perceived reasons why the learner has undertaken training. A recent study of social work students found that thirty-nine per cent of those interviewed stated that they had entered training because of “career considerations or employer pressure” (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). Their initial approach to learning as a result may have been quite different to those students who

chose learning for its own sake.

Motivation is not the only area in which feelings affect the individual learner’s capacity to learn and to transfer learning. Learning brings with it risks and dangers for the individual learner. The process of learning is a process of change, (as indeed is the process of social work itself), and learners may feel quite ambivalent about that change (Curnock, 1985). Parsloe’s (1983) investigation of readiness to practice identifies a gap in social work training around the subject of feelings, values and attitudes. Although problems in social work are steeped in value-issues and feelings, these are sometimes discussed but rarely acted upon. She urges that more attention should be given to the affective side of social work: transfer of learning will not be complete without this.

### ***Learning approaches and styles***

Learning to learn, whereby learners become aware of their own learning process, is sometimes called metacognition. Those of us who have worked closely with social work students will be aware that there are students whose approaches to learning (sometimes called their ‘learning styles’) demonstrate the capacity for self-reflection and critical thinking that goes hand-in-hand with the ability to transfer learning. Others seem to be overly focused on task and unable to take in ‘the big picture’. Educational research suggests that people learn in different ways according to their personal and cultural histories and their life-stages and stage in the educational process. For example, Entwistle (1987 & 1990) distinguishes between three very different approaches to learning: deep, surface and strategic approaches. A ‘deep’ approach to learning brings with it the intention to understand and to relate new ideas to previous knowledge, while a ‘surface’ approach focuses on completing requirements and memorising what is needed for assessments. A third approach is ‘strategic’, in that the student organises time and distributes effort to the greatest effect in order to achieve the best possible grades. Entwistle’s research demonstrates that although individual background and personality may be important in determining learning style, so too is the structure of teaching and learning, and more specifically, the assessment process itself. (This point will be developed more fully below.)

In order to examine learning approaches, the use of learning styles’ inventories and questionnaires has become increasingly popular amongst social work

educators, practice teachers and tutors alike. Some caution is required in the use of these as would-be ‘diagnostic’ tools (Cree, Macaulay & Loney, 1998: pp.26-30). Although it is highly desirable that discussion takes place about how students learn, and such tools may provide a useful starting-point for this, questionnaires and inventories should not be employed as a means of categorisation either in the short or long term. Research findings suggest that such inappropriate use of inventories may lead teachers to fall into the trap of seeing students in a specific light, and teaching to their strengths rather than encouraging them to develop new learning strategies (Pask, 1976). In any case, students may have more than one preferred learning style, which is likely to vary from subject to subject (Dixon, 1985).

**The learning and transfer task**

In considering their own experience of learning transfer, workshop participants came up with a range of issues that were to do with the learning and transfer task.

Again the topics that emerged from discussion had resonance with findings from the broader literature. Studies of transfer of learning in various disciplines

- and understanding;
- ☐ matching content to the intellectual stage of development students have reached;
- ☐ helping students to perceive relevance and to develop interest in the syllabus;
- ☐ encouraging in students more independent, purposive, and reflective ways of studying;
- ☐ offering choice in both courses or topics studied and assignments;
- ☐ providing a syllabus which encourages depth and avoids an excessive workload;
- ☐ teaching in ways which explain concepts fully, with enthusiasm and empathy;
- ☐ emphasising and modelling the ways of thinking characteristic of the discipline;
- ☐ choosing textbooks and providing learning resources which provoke thinking;
- ☐ providing opportunities for discussion and collaborative working on realistic problems;
- ☐ designing assignments which encourage active questioning and discussion;
- ☐ assessing and providing feedback in ways which directly reward understanding;
- ☐ developing a departmental or course team ethos which encourages reflection on teaching.”

(1995:p.12)

Entwistle’s vision of good teaching is clearly far wider than what we might be conventionally regard as teaching. He is concerned here with everything

What helped?	What hindered?
Clarity about task	Lack of clarity about task
Systems and structures	Poor management
Achievable task	Over-laden curriculum
Incremental building	Timing
Deadlines	Assessment methods
Time to think and analyse	Terminology inhibiting
Observing and being observed	Poor supervision
Time and opportunity to practice	Risk of failure

including education and social work suggest that transfer of learning is facilitated by:

- ☐ a learning experience which is well-taught and well-integrated with previous knowledge;
- ☐ teaching and assessment methods which seek to enhance the ability of students to make connections;
- ☐ ample scope for putting learning into practice.

**Well-taught and well-integrated learning**

Good teaching is a clear pre-requisite for good learning. Entwistle (1995) identifies the following aspects for achieving quality in teaching:

- ☐ “ensuring students have adequate prior knowledge

from curriculum organisation to resources to assessment and course delivery, all of which may have an impact on student’s capacity to learn, and so to transfer learning.

Educational research also indicates that for learning to be well-integrated, it must appear both real and relevant to the learner: the word frequently used to capture this spirit is ‘authenticity’ (Billett, 1994; Cust, 1995). For example, Dickson and Bamford (1995) in their investigation of social work students and the teaching of interpersonal skills argue that the likelihood of transfer is predicted by “the extent to which the learning has utility, desirability, practicality, appropriateness and adaptability for the student”. (1995: p.97)

### ***Teaching and assessment methods that promote transfer***

Research into higher education in Britain and the United States suggests that universities and colleges need to take greater account of the very diverse group of students with whom they are working (Anderson & Adams, 1992). Conventional pedagogic teaching methods with their 'top down' approach are felt to be inappropriate for adult learners who bring considerable knowledge and skills (Knowles, 1983; Shardlow & Doel, 1996; Usher & Bryant, 1989). Andragogic teaching in contrast relies heavily on students working from their own experience, in a collaborative way with teachers and fellow-students.

Beyond this starting point, educational research also suggests that although transfer of learning may largely be an internal process, it is likely to be facilitated by making explicit connections which might otherwise be unconscious or unplanned. There is a strong indication here that teachers should *teach* for transfer by:

- "pointing out similarities and connections to students;
  - using analogies and examples which will broaden students' perceptions and understandings;
  - adopting teaching methods which will encourage students to develop their abilities to generalise and to discriminate;
  - giving students feedback on the generalisations and discriminations which they are making."
- (Cree et al., 1998: p.36).

It is evident from a review of the literature that whatever is the preferred mode of programme delivery (whether through a practice curriculum or Enquiry and Action Learning or a more traditional seminar structure), lecturers, practice teachers and tutors must facilitate and at times consciously intervene in students' learning, that is, they must 'teach for transfer'.

A useful suggestion from educational research suggests that learning can be 'bedded down' better if it is returned to on a number of occasions in different ways. The idea of 'curriculum spirals' is that students should be able to revisit learning a number of times during a course, thus building up their theoretical knowledge and practical skills in a gradual way, giving them time to internalise their learning (Jinks, 1991). This has also been called "overlearning" (Dickson & Bamford, 1985).

This takes us back to the point made earlier that teaching and assessment procedures may induce students to adopt particular learning styles and approaches. If we want students to adopt the 'deep' approaches that are essential for transfer of learning, we must give them space and support to learn. This means providing them with a curriculum that is organised in a structured and meaningful way; one that is not overly ruled by full timetables, a heavy case-load or too much assessment. Entwistle's (1990) research demonstrates that the process of assessment may either facilitate or inhibit transfer of learning, depending on how it is organised and structured. Open and collaborative assessment systems may encourage 'deep' learning and a confidence to try out new approaches and transfer of learning; over-laden, restrictive assessment procedures may create anxiety in students and lead students to adopt either a 'surface' or a 'strategic' approach to learning, thus interfering with the potential for transfer of learning taking place.

### ***Putting learning into practice***

Learning is only fully integrated once it has been put into practice (Butler & Elliott, 1985; Stevenson, 1994). Not only this, there must be opportunities for different kinds of applications in different settings. Because of this, practical exercises and simulation tasks are essential for ensuring the better transfer of learning. Ehrenberg (1983) argues for what is a 'cumulative-rotation process': students rotate between learning and application so that every new task, procedure, strategy and concept, once learned, is applied cumulatively in the real situation until the total desired outcome is achieved (1983: p.82). This model is strongly reminiscent of Kolb's (1974) conceptualisation of learning as a cyclical process in which the relationship between concrete experience and conceptualisation of this experience is constantly being re-defined.

### **The learning and transfer context**

In their discussion of transfer of learning, workshop participants identified a number of factors that are best summed up as learning and transfer context.

Again, all of the subjects mentioned above (and more) can be found in the transfer of learning literature. Educational research demonstrates that the wider socio-political and institutional context, the organisational context and the educational context together influence students' ability to learn and thus to transfer learning.

	What helped?	What hindered?
resources	Support/ mentor/ 'expert'	Lack of support
	Acceptance of mistakes	'Triumphalism' in other people
	Accessibility of training	Lack of
	Practical help	Isolation
	Rewards/ 'pay-offs'	Punishment

**Socio-political and institutional context**

Social work students undergoing training in today's social and political context face a number of challenges which may facilitate or impede their learning. On the positive side, more people are engaged in training at all levels in social work, from pre-qualifying training to post-qualifying training. At the same time social work education in the UK has developed new partnerships between employers and trainers, between the academic institution and the agency setting (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, 1995). This may be seen as helpfully reducing the gap between academics and professionals, between theory and practice (see Eraut, 1994 for a fuller discussion of developments in professional education). The wider context may also, however, inhibit transfer of learning. The higher intake of students to higher education has led to an increase in student withdrawals and failures. Cutbacks in student grants and the introduction of student loans have led to growing student poverty, and more students seeking paid employment during the course of their study. At the same time as class sizes have increased, lecturers feel greater pressure to meet ever-higher expectations in terms of research activity and publications. Pressure is not only felt in the academic world. Students on placement experience the detrimental impact of cuts in services, rising numbers of unallocated cases, social workers and practice teachers feeling demoralised and anxious about the future. Students also feel the restrictions of some current management approaches to service delivery. Sawdon sees as a major obstacle to transfer of learning a "government office mentality which frowns on initiative or sees social workers as cogs in a bureaucratic machine". (1986: p. 100)

**Organisational context**

Two related developments have had a profound impact on higher education in general and on social work education in particular: that is, competency approaches and modularisation. A number of

features that are significant for transfer of learning underpin the competency model. There is an attempt to specify knowledge, skills and values across the whole of the social work profession, allowing for a standardisation across agencies and educational institutions. At the same time, there is recognition that differing students may meet the end-point of competent practice in different ways and that programmes are free to innovate within the framework set. In social work education in the UK, as already stated, the transfer of knowledge, skills and values is a requirement for competence (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, 1995). These are clearly positive facilitators for transfer of learning: for transfer to take place, students must have a clear picture of what is to be transferred and an indication that transfer is possible. Competency models have also been criticised, however, for leading to a fragmented approach to learning. Units which have strong areas of overlap with each other may be unhelpfully separated out, knowledge and skills are split up (Barnett, 1994; Ford, 1996) and there is a loss of focus on the development of values and beliefs (Bilson, 1993). Most importantly for transfer of learning, it is argued that focusing on the outcome of learning may lead to a devaluing of the process of achieving that learning (Shardlow & Doel, 1996).

Similarly the modular approach to curriculum delivery has the potential both to encourage and detract from transfer of learning. Modularisation holds the possibility of more systematic, identifiable and flexible learning, enabling students to acquire credits from a variety of sources and to enter and exit education at different points (Reeve and Smith 1996). But modularisation, with its discrete units of learning, has also been accused of inhibiting transfer of learning through the compartmentalisation which discourages students from making connections between different areas of the curriculum.

**The educational context**

Entwistle (1990) is highly critical of the educational context of many courses in the UK. He argues that teaching and assessment methods currently adopted convey an implicit message that reproductive learning is all that is required:

“Students’ overriding concern is to fulfil assessment requirements and so, in most courses, they will use any newly acquired awareness of study strategies to become more efficient surface learners”. (1990: p.677)

Entwistle concludes that organisation of teaching must be re-designed so that understanding becomes a core learning activity. A good transfer of learning environment is not, however, a matter solely for the educational institution. The workplace and placement agency must also be committed to supporting openness and creativity on the part of its practitioners, and be prepared to offer a safe, well-supported setting in which students and employees are not afraid to try out different approaches and learn to transfer.

Positive support in the form of good supervision is another area that deserves a mention here. In a study of social work practice teachers’ use of supervision, Gardiner (1989) identifies three levels of practice teachers’ understanding of the concept ‘learning’. In Level One, supervision was seen to be primarily about the content of learning and involved direct teaching by the supervisor. This approach was characterised by the idea that there were single ‘right’ ways both to learn and to practise. In Level Two, there was a recognition that learning required the active involvement of the student: the practice teacher was therefore able to focus on the process of learning as well as the content, and recognise the diversity of approaches to learning and teaching and in practice. In Level Three, there was an ability to teach, learn and practise in different ways, dependent on perceptions of demands of particular learning situations. The practice teacher was also able to reflect on experience and evaluate the relevance of different approaches: to transfer both the content and process of learning to new and different situations. Gardiner concludes that although level three is not necessarily better than level one, since both may be needed for specific tasks, practice teachers must aim for a level three approach in order to facilitate transfer of learning. To achieve this, practice teachers must have a good grasp of their own learning and at the same time be prepared to model transfer of learning as well as encouraging it in their students.

Research conducted with student teachers on school-based placements gives an interesting insight into the role of the supervisor (or ‘mentor’ in the teaching set-up). Cameron-Jones and O’Hara (1997) asked student teachers and their mentors to what degree they felt that the students had been supported and challenged by their mentors. Their findings demonstrate that students consistently felt that they had not been sufficiently challenged in their work, while mentors believed that they had challenged the students effectively. Cameron-Jones and O’Hara explore this further, citing research which suggests that at times support can effectively ‘kill’ the intent, expression or impact of challenge when the two are present in combination. This is highly relevant for transfer of learning, since learning transfer seems to be encouraged by an educational context that provides both support and a measure of challenge.

## Summary

We have argued that transfer of learning may be either facilitated or impeded by different aspects in the individual learner, the learning and transfer task, and the learning and transfer environment. Some of the areas we have examined may be beyond our control as teachers and trainers - we cannot undo the bad experiences that students may bring with them, and it may not be possible to improve sufficiently the socio-economic and political climate in which their learning takes place. But there are a great many aspects of students’ learning that we can and should set out to change, since transfer of learning is “fundamental to all learning” (Fleishman, 1987: xi).

The Conference workshop, as already stated, aimed to demonstrate the process of transfer of learning in practice. We began with previous experience, and drew out common themes from this. These themes formed a provisional construct which was then interrogated and expanded on in the workshop leader’s input on theoretical literature and empirical research on transfer of learning. Through our exploration and discussion, we were together able to build a new resource bank of knowledge (both conceptual and procedural knowledge) (see Eraut, 1994) which we can take forward into our future experiences of learning.

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Introduction personal and social development the environment learning changes of attitudes through sharing experiences teaching styles the inherent value of outdoor education implications of respondents! Conceptions of. Adventure concluding comments.