Siobhan Maclean and Rob Harrison have a particular interest in supporting practice educators to enable students learning about theory and practice. As such they have developed a range of exercises and techniques to support students. These are outlined in a variety of publications, including:


Whilst the basic aspects of social work theory should be taught in the University setting, practice educators will need to assist students to transfer their knowledge and apply theory to practice. Practice educators might have concerns about this area for a range of reasons. Anxiety about the application of theory to practice is not confined to students – experienced workers and practice educators are also anxious about this area.

It is important to recognise that there is no single approach to applying theory to practice just as there is no single approach to supporting a student’s learning in this area. A good working knowledge of theory is based on the perspective that each service user is different and different approaches will be suited to individual circumstances, needs and cultural requirements. Students need to have a good “toolkit” and understanding of the application of various approaches to ensure that they can apply an anti-oppressive individualised approach to the use of social work theory.

The following six exercises are taken from the publications listed above. The selection builds on the following issues:

**Thinking styles** – the exercises address each of the three main thinking styles (verbal, pictorial and musical). Exercises 1, 2 and 3 build on verbal thinking; exercises 4 and 5 build on pictorial thinking and the exercise taken from the theory cards builds on musical thinking patterns.

**What? Why? How?** – these three questions provide a basic social work framework and are useful in developing learning plans for students, so the selected exercises address aspects of each of the three questions by exploring what constitutes a theory, why theory is important and how theory informed practice can be developed.

**Supervision discussion**

Theory informed practice should permeate all supervision discussion – in a meaningful way. Experienced practice educators will know how it can go. In supervision, the student and practice educator are discussing a situation the student has worked with and the
practice educator asks the student “What theories were you using?” Once the petrified look has gone from the student’s face, they say “task centred practice and attachment”. The practice educator says “OK”. Box ticked. Nothing further. That’s not applying theory to practice – it’s plucking a few phrases from a book.

The aim should be for the student to be able to describe:

- What they did
- Why they did it
- How they applied each theory
- What worked and what they might do differently in their application of a theory in future
- What other theories may have been relevant to a situation or individual and why they chose not to use these

This is what makes the difference between someone who is studying for a professional qualification in social work and one who acts on instinct or “gut”. If someone is professionally qualified, there is an expectation that they act ethically, with knowledge of why they make certain decisions, and that they are able to justify these, to managers, other professionals, vulnerable people and their families.

There needs to be scope within supervision sessions for reflection on decision making processes in relation to the use and application of theory. This is essential so that students can discuss their choices and means for coming to a decision. There also needs to be scope for theory to be something dynamic which is open to critique, as a worker who accepts everything which is “known” is not one who is thinking through application fully. A competent practitioner is one who makes informed choices with knowledge, understanding and conscious reasoning.

All the learning opportunities experienced by the student during the placement can be discussed in supervision with theoretical aspects drawn out. For example, where a student has shadowed another worker, the student can be asked in supervision to reflect on what theories they felt were being used. This will enable the student to build their own confidence to try what works for them and to move away from the concept of theory as something purely academic and taught, to something which is used by everyone in the field.

Every learning opportunity a student has provides the scope for facilitating a student’s learning about theory. A skilled and reflective practice educator will make full use of coaching questions to enable a student to fully consider the theoretical approaches used. Theory needs to be constantly on the practice educator’s agenda to model theory informed practice for the student.
SPECIFIC EXERCISES

1. What is a theory?

*See handout 1 (What is a Theory?)*

When considering what constitutes a theory it is useful to look to what a theory is said to do. In science a theory is supposed to:

*Describe:* What is happening?

*Explain:* Why it is happening? How did it come about?

*Predict:* What is likely to happen next?

*Control and bring about change:* How can I intervene to change what is likely to happen?

Within social work we would not use the final term as “control and bring about change”. This is because we work with people and are not seeking to control. We prefer to use the term – intervene and bring about change. It could be useful to ask a student to work through these questions in relation to a case / situation they are working with. In doing so they should be able to relate theory to their analysis. We find it useful to ask a student to use these questions as the basis for a diary / journal entry, as it can assist the student in making theoretical links.

Using this understanding of theory – particularly of these questions can also assist students in understanding the difference between a theory and model (as we see the essential difference as being based around these questions). Whilst many theories help social workers to describe, explain and predict some leave workers frustrated as they don’t give advice on what can be done. Models on the other hand always offer an answer to the question how can I intervene and bring about change?

2. Exploring why theory informed practice is important

*See handout 2 (Why do we need to use theory in social work practice)*

Sometimes students are reluctant to explore theory informed practice because they don’t see why theory is important for social work practice. In this case it is worth asking a student to think through a couple of questions:

- Why do you think theory informed practice isn’t important?
- Why might others think theory informed practice is important?

A student can make some notes to bring to supervision for discussion. When they have made their notes you could provide them with the handout and follow up on the discussion.

This can be an enlightening activity for many students. We have often found that students are not able to give many valid reasons about why theory informed practice isn’t important. In fact we have found that it has enabled some students to recognise the value of theory informed practice and to explore the fact that their dismissiveness may have been linked to a “fear” of, or anxiety about, theory. Enabling students to open up about this can help them to move onto exploring the links between theory and practice.
3. “Listing” theories

This is a very straightforward exercise but one which can help a student identify their preferred theory. We would argue that most people favour some theoretical approaches over others – but sometimes students aren’t aware of which theory is their preferred one. Ask a student to keep a running list of theories – each time they feel they have used a theory ask them to add it to their list. Students often find it useful to keep the list in the back of their diary. Advise students not to worry about being repetitive on the list, they should add to it each time they feel they have used the theory – even if it already appears on the list. Over time a pattern should emerge with some theories appearing on the list more than once. Use this as a discussion point with a student. Can they identify which theories they favour? Why do they use that theory regularly? etc.

4. Linking theories

See handout 3 (Linking theories together)

A number of theories and models have common core themes. Encouraging a student to explore these can be helpful in opening up their understanding of how theories can compliment each other. This exercise works particularly well with pictorial thinkers.

5. Using bullet points to draw out theory

See handout 4 (Using bullet points to identify potentially relevant theories)

An exercise which can be useful to help students identify relevant theories is to encourage them to identify key areas through the use of bullet points.

When a student is working with a service user, ask them to identify:

- Some key aspects of the service user identity
- Key aspects of the presenting issues
- Key aspects of agency context and practice
- Key points of the work to be undertaken

6. Social Work Theory Cards

These have been developed to provide a visual and tactile experience around theory informed practice. The cards consist of 88 A5 sized cards summarising a range of theories and models which are useful for social work practice. 12 blank cards are also included (should a theory which is used in the placement setting not be included on the cards). The cards come with a booklet outlining a range of activities and exercises using the cards. Exercises range from games like theory charades and snap to Come Theorise with Me.

One of the main ideas behind the cards is to address the “Fear factor” which has built up around the use of theory in practice. A number of teams have found using these cards in practice helpful in team meetings and for wider practice. For example some teams have developed the idea of having a “Theory of the week” with that card being displayed alongside the team signing in board – just to promote team discussion about theory and to keep theory on the professional agenda.
One activity which is great fun in a group setting builds on the idea of musical thinking styles:

**Name that Tune**

Whilst this sounds overly humorous, I have found that it has prompted a great deal of ongoing discussion after a session and that it has caught the imagination of a number of students and social work team members.

The basic idea is to link a song with a theory based on either the title of the song or the lyrics. One student I worked with developed a powerpoint presentation with clips of the songs linked in - this prompted some real fun in a team meeting. A few basic ideas:

- Strengths perspective - Something inside so strong
- Biographical / Narrative approaches - It’s my life
- Feminism - If I were a Boy
- Bowen Theory - We are Family
- Resilience - I will Survive

The cards have been used to develop this idea in a number of ways. For example: With no preparation, a number of cards can be laid out (title side up) and people can be invited to link any card they can with a song.

A number of cards can be given out to different group members who have some time to prepare their ideas about relevant song titles for an upcoming session.

This exercise can demonstrate a range of issues. For example, generation can have an impact on musical tastes and styles – just as different theories have been popular at different times; some people prefer different styles of music just as we prefer different theories; different songs may all be included in one genre or style of music – just as a number of theories may all be included within one overall approach.

Search for other Kirwin Maclean learning resources: there are powerpoint slides which give further information on the cards.
1. WHAT IS A THEORY?

There has been some debate about what actually constitutes a theory. Generally, a theory helps to explain a situation and perhaps how it came about. In science, a theory is seen as helping to:

- Describe (eg: what is happening?)
- Explain (eg: why is it happening?)
- Predict (eg: what is likely to happen next?)
- Control and bring about change (eg: how can I intervene to bring about change in the situation?)

In social work there are a range of different types of theory. An understanding of these different types or forms of theory can be helpful in supporting you to recognise that you do use a range of theories in any given situation.

Beckett (2006) separates theory into 'formal' theory and 'informal' theory. Some people use these terms inappropriately - formal theory is taken to mean theory which is presented more academically and informal theory is taken to mean theory which is more accessible and understandable. However, this is a misunderstanding. Formal theory is basically any theory which can be named and traced back to a writer. Informal theory on the other hand, is the worker's own ideas about a situation. As this is often developed through experience - both practice experience and personal experiences, this type of 'theory' is also referred to as practice wisdom (Doel and Shardlow 1993) or common knowledge (Beckett 2006). Many social workers and students use "practice wisdom" or "common knowledge" which usually contains a range of formal theory.

Whilst Beckett categorises theory into formal and informal, other writers draw other distinctions. One common idea is that there are theories of
social work and theories for social work. In straightforward terms, this means that there are theories about the way social work is delivered which constitute theories of social work – eg: task centred practice, crisis intervention etc. Theories for social work are essentially theories which can explain situations, behaviours etc – such as behavioural approaches, systems theory etc.

Sibeon (1989) takes this idea further and proposes a three part distinction between theories:

- Theories of what social work does.
- Theories of how to do social work.
- Theories of the client’s world.

There is often debate in social work about the difference between a theory and a model. We would argue that you can use some of the debates around different forms of theory to understand this. In our view a theory helps a worker to understand people and situations whereas a model helps offer options for working with the situation, providing a framework for practice.
2. WHY DO WE NEED TO USE THEORY IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE?

Whilst individual theories have different purposes, using all kinds of theory in our work offers us, as social workers, some important things.

 Theories can help us to make sense of a situation. Using theory, we can generate ideas about what is happening, why things are as they are etc.

 Using theory can help to justify actions and explain practice to service users, carers, managers and society in general. The aim is that this will lead to social work becoming more widely accountable and ultimately more respected.

 When working with individuals, making use of the theories which may relate to their specific situation will give us more direction in our work.

 Using theory can give a reason about why an action resulted in a particular consequence. This can help us review and possibly change our practice in an attempt to make the consequences more effective.

 Changes in the profession – particularly in service delivery may well be influenced by a theoretical framework. Therefore if we have an understanding of theory it can help us to anticipate likely future changes in the profession.

 The development of a core knowledge base around theory will support the development of a more cohesive profession.

 Theory informed practice is a key component of the professionalisation agenda.
One way of considering what theories you might be drawing on in your work is to consider some of the key principles guiding your practice. You are likely to find that these key principles are common to a number of theories and models. For example, a worker could say that one of the key principles guiding their work was a commitment to seeing a service user as the expert on their own situation. This is a concept contained in a number of theories as the following diagram illustrates.

3. LINKING THEORIES TOGETHER

A service user should be seen as the expert on their own situation

- strengths perspective
- task centred approaches
- narrative approaches
- social constructionism (self narratives)
- personal recovery model
- exchange model of assessment

Cont...
Can you identify any core aspects which underpin your practice? What theories might refer to this? Try to draw up a diagram like the one overleaf which can help you identify theoretical influences on your work.

4. USING BULLET POINTS TO IDENTIFY POTENTIALLY RELEVANT THEORIES

Put some key bullet points into each area. (Your practice educator will be able to give you some examples.)

- Look at each bullet point and consider what theory / theories might be applicable to each point. (You are likely to identify a huge range of theories, some of which you may use and some which you won’t have used.)
- Which of the theories identified have you used? How did they inform your work?
- Which of the identified theories didn’t you use? Why?
- If you would have chosen different theories would these have led to you working differently? Would they have led to different outcomes for the service user? In what ways?