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Virtue Ethics for Social Work: A New Pedagogy for Practical Reasoning

Annie Pullen-Sansfacon

Virtue ethics has begun to regain popularity among philosophers, and recent commentators have expressed enthusiasm vis-à-vis its appropriateness and strengths in the task of practising ethically in social work. Notwithstanding this growing interest in adopting virtue ethics frameworks, some difficulties arise when the question of how to develop social work virtues is posed. By examining the concept of reflective practice, and building from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, this article explores how practical reasoning as a collective activity can help social work students in their moral development by developing and nurturing appropriate virtues for social work. A combination of Socratic dialogue activities, lectures and seminar work is highlighted as a potential pedagogical approach to teaching ethics and values on an undergraduate social work module at Coventry University. The approach is then appraised in the light of a set of module evaluation questionnaires distributed to students who undertook the module during the academic year 2006–2007.

Keywords: Virtue Ethics; Practical Reasoning; Social Work Education; Moral Theories; Socratic Dialogue

This article will explore a model for teaching values and ethics based on a combination of Socratic dialogue sessions and lectures covering various aspects of moral philosophy applied to social work practice. It will be argued that social work virtues can be developed through practical reasoning activities that materialized through Socratic dialogues between groups of students. The article will begin by briefly exploring the current literature on virtue ethics and social work practice and then examine the concepts of reflective practice as well as practical reasoning. The article will then propose a model for teaching values and ethics and show how the model was embedded into an undergraduate social work module at Coventry University.

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Finally, based on module evaluation questionnaires, the article will provide a review of the students' experience of this module as well as reflect on some of the module design and delivery.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics, in comparison to other moral theories, has received little consideration in social work (Houston, 2003). Indeed, most current codes of ethics in social work tend to favour Kantian and utilitarian approaches (McBeath and Webb, 2002; Wilks, 2005; Banks, 2006). However, virtue ethics is recognized as an appropriate moral philosophy for application to social work practice and has gained in popularity among a small number of social work academics in recent decades (Rhodes, 1986; Banks, 2001; McBeath and Webb, 2002; Clark, 2005; Banks and Gallagher, 2009).

Virtue ethics derives from the works of Plato (c. 427 BC) and Aristotle (c. 384 BC), who defined morality around the question of character (i.e. what sort of person should one be?) (Vardy and Grosch, 1999). Virtue ethics is a moral approach that does not take into consideration the action and the reason for the action, but instead emphasizes the importance of 'personality traits' that are the products of a fine balance or the mean between 'vice' and 'excess' and that promote human flourishing (Hugman, 2005). Therefore, for the virtue ethicist, a 'good' person will act in a 'good' way not because of their principles or duty but because they are 'good'. As Banks (2006, p. 55) comments, a person will not tell a lie,

not because of some abstract principles stating "you shall not lie" or because on this occasion telling the truth will produce a good result, but because they do not want to be the sort of person who tells lies.

A virtue, which MacIntyre explains as 'an acquired human quality' (1985, p. 191), rather than a feeling about rightness or wrongness, can be developed through strength of character. A virtue, according to MacIntyre (1999), can be unlocked and cultivated through practical reasoning. Virtues, or human qualities, also have to be practised in order to become part of one's life as opposed to a one-off act of heroism (Lynch and Lynch, 2006).

Some virtues that could relate to social work practice have been identified by Lynch and Lynch (2006) and Clark (2006) as temperance, magnanimity, gentleness, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, modesty and justice. Banks and Gallagher (2009) identify and discuss other virtues for social work such as professional wisdom, care, respectfulness and courage. However, while some authors attempt to list and discuss a range of virtues appropriate to social work practice (see also Rhodes, 1986; Beauchamp and Childress, 1994 cited in Banks, 2001; Banks and Gallagher, 2009) they do not suggest detailed practical ways of developing virtuous character traits.

Indeed, one critique of virtue ethics in general concerns the 'insufficient attention given to the problem of how virtue is defined and established in the first instance' (Houston, 2003, p. 819). Indeed, some commentators reflect on the lack of clarity about how one can develop these traits of personality and, in this case, how one

develops morally and nurtures virtues appropriate to social work practice. Certainly, while MacIntyre (1999) asserts that virtues can be developed and nurtured through practical reasoning, no practical ways forward are proposed to achieve this. Houston suggests a ‘Habermasian’ model, which involves group reflection with the aim of reaching consensus, but this proposition remains somehow abstract. McBeath and Webb (2002), on the other hand, suggest that virtues can be developed through experience, reflection and circumspection, but they are unclear as to how this can be successfully achieved in practice. As a result, while the literature on virtue ethics shows relevance to, and support for, virtue ethics in social work, practical ways forward are not presented [see Banks and Gallagher (2009) for a full discussion on the relevance of virtue ethics for Health and Social Care].

Reflective Practice

Building from McBeath and Webb’s (2002) work and reflection on the development of virtuous character traits, reflective practice could be a useful starting point, as the activity is related to practical experience and involves reflection and circumspection, both essential elements for the process of developing virtues. For example, Payne (2002, p. 126) suggests, in relation to reflective practice:

Any situation may need us to develop and change our guidelines, responding to new aspects of the work and social circumstances that we meet. We must look underneath the surface relationship and events which are presented to us. At any time we may need to think again and think differently. Because this kind of flexibility is the essence of dealing with any human being and being effective in working on complex human problems, critical awareness and reflection is an important practical implementation of the social work value of respecting human individuality and rights.

The concept of reflective practice could therefore be a helpful tool for social workers seeking to develop virtues. Reflective practice has been common to social work for more than two decades and is already an important element of the social work education curriculum (Brown and Rutter, 2006). Reflective practice involves making links between practice and theory through carefully thinking things through and taking all aspects into account (Payne, 2002). Trevithick (2005, p. 252) explains reflective practice as a process that ‘involves developing the capacity for flexible and creative thinking’. However, as it stands, reflective practice alone does not seem to be sufficiently well-developed to be helpful to social workers trying to manage routine ethical dilemmas (Houston, 2003). As Gould and Taylor (1986, cited in Gould and Baldwin, 2004) argue, reflective practice is becoming something of a ‘slogan’.

Assuming that social workers attempt to be ‘reflective practitioners’ while intervening with service users, in particular when faced with an ethical issue or dilemma, it would be appropriate to suggest that reflective practice does not suffice. For example, Yip (2006) identifies a number of inappropriate conditions, such as an oppressive or demanding work environment, that affect the capacity for reflective practice and which may result in the destruction of the social worker’s

self-enhancement as opposed to assisting in developing the positive character traits of virtues.

Some of these conditions were also highlighted by the author (Pullen-Sansfacon, 2007), who stressed that, even when reflective practice is carried out in relation to managing ethical dilemmas, practitioners often allow the organizational context of work to take precedence over their social work values, especially where their work setting is highly structured. Bar-On (2002), on the other hand, specifically discusses difficulties emerging from power relationships found in social work practice contexts. In light of these observations, reflective practice alone does not appear to be sufficient: something needs to be further added to the process of reflective practice in social work in order to stimulate further moral growth, assist in the development of virtues and ultimately ensure a more ethical social work practice.

Practical Reasoning as a Means of Developing Virtues

Practical reasoning is a concept linked to the development of virtues (MacIntyre, 1999). Practical reasoning involves 'reasoning together with others, generally within some determinate set of social relationships' (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 107). The relationships to which MacIntyre (1999) refers are formed as a result of associations between individuals sharing the same 'practice': in this instance, social work practice based on shared values, skills and knowledge. A practical reasoner, according to MacIntyre (1999, p. 83), has 'the ability to evaluate, modify or reject [his/her] own practical judgments; to ask whether what [he/she] takes to be good reasons for action really *are* sufficiently good reasons' (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 83). It is through habituation in undertaking practical reasoning that the virtues, or positive character traits such as 'courage', 'justice' and 'temperance', develop and accordingly enable people to act morally: a moral character performs virtuous acts in any given moral situation (Morse, 1999).

In view of the above definitions, it can be asserted that practical reasoning is an activity that shares similarities with the concept of reflective practice. Indeed, practical reasoning involves evaluating, modifying or rejecting our own practical judgements as with reflective practice and emphasizes the importance of carefully thinking things through and taking all aspects of a situation into account (Payne, 2002). By undertaking practical reasoning, one also develops the capacity for flexible and creative thinking, qualities identified by Trevithick (2005) as essential in reflective practice. However, MacIntyre (1999, p. 157) points out an important difference in developing the concept of practical reasoning, namely the centrality of the collective nature of the activity:

[Practical reasoning] is something that *we* undertake from within *our* shared mode of practice by asking, when we have good reason to do so, what the strongest and soundest objections are to this or that particular belief or concept that *we* have up to this point taken for granted. [Author's own emphasis]

MacIntyre (1999) offers the concept of *practical reasoning* as a *collective activity*, as the necessary means to develop and unlock the virtues required for good conduct

in society. What differentiates MacIntyre's understanding of practical reasoning from the concept of reflective practice [as presently understood in the social work and social care sector—a sort of 'lesson learnt' (Chiu, 2006, p. 184)] is his belief that, for ethical action to take place, the process must happen *collectively*. In the context of social work practice, this means that reflections and, subsequently, decisions taken by practitioners in relation to ethical dilemmas rooted in social work values could be maximized through activities that emphasize practical reasoning as a collective activity.

Furthermore, the collective nature of practical reasoning as explored by MacIntyre (1999) may act as a catalyst to work through the difficult conditions encountered in practice as noted earlier (Yip, 2006; Pullen-Sansfacon, 2007). Indeed, collective work can enable workers to resist power relationships (Freire, 1972; Mullender and Ward, 1991). Fenwick (2003, p. 622) explains:

Collective action is key; when cultural resistance through collective action is combined with critical analysis on power relationships and structural oppression, people can explore unexpected, unimagined possibilities for work, life and development.

In light of MacIntyre's insight, it can be argued that, while reflective practice is important as an individual process for thinking about events and evaluating our understanding and development of learning, social work students and practitioners would further benefit from group practical reasoning activities. However, as in the case of Houston's comment on the problem of practicality in developing and nurturing virtues, 'practical reasoning' is a concept that remains broad and would greatly benefit from practical tools for its application.

The following section will examine a possible way to develop virtues through the exercise of practical reasoning as a collective activity. 'Socratic dialogue' will be explored as a tool to achieve this, and ways will be proposed in which such a strategy can be integrated into social work education.

Socratic Dialogue as a Tool for Collective Practical Reasoning and Developing Virtues

Socratic dialogue is an effective tool for undertaking practical reasoning (Philippart, 2003) and developing professional wisdom, the 'very necessary virtue guiding and governing the other virtues and encompassing the perceptual and deliberative capabilities that enable professional to be ethical in practice' (Banks and Gallagher, 2009, pp. 94–95). Socratic dialogue was developed by Plato and furthered by Nelson and Heckman according to Saran and Neisser (2004). Socratic dialogue, or neo-Socratic dialogue as it is known by 'Nelson and Heckman' followers, requires a good deal of time in so far as the activities can last up to two days (Saran and Neisser, 2004). The overall aim of Socratic dialogue is to try to reach consensus on values and principles in a question that is set at the beginning of the process. This question is explored through an analysis of practical experiences. The process includes an exploration of various assumptions and beliefs that underlie common behaviours.

Saran and Neisser (2004) describe the Socratic dialogue approach as being practised in small groups with the help of a facilitator who seeks to encourage participants to reflect and think independently and critically so that self-confidence in one's own thinking is enhanced and the search for the true answer to a particular question is undertaken collectively. Indeed, Philippart (2003, p. 70) argues that

Socratic dialogue helps constitute a growing awareness of the actual assumptions, presuppositions, norms and values that play a role in personal and collective thinking and feeling on every kind of matter.

The Socratic dialogue approach is therefore a potentially suitable technique to enable students to undertake practical reasoning at the collective level and to develop virtuous character traits as proposed by MacIntyre (1999).

Indeed, many authors agree that the Socratic dialogue approach can be a very effective tool for developing virtues (Overholser, 1999; Gronke, 2005; Kessels, 2005; Banks and Gallagher, 2009) in so far as participants, through discussing a set question, develop 'virtuous' habits such as critical thinking and self-consciousness, virtues identified by McBeath and Webb (2002) as significant to social work practice. The Socratic dialogue approach helps to enhance effective thinking about organizational life (Burnyeat, 1990, cited in Morrell, 2004), it enables problem-finding (Arlin, 1990, cited in Morrell, 2004) and it protects against complacency or misplaced certainty (Meacham, 1990, cited in Morrell, 2004).

The Socratic dialogue approach benefits from the involvement of different stakeholders as it provides an opportunity to nurture broader and deeper discussions on the topic (Boers, 2005; Kessels, 2005). As Morse (1999, p. 52) notes,

The impact of one's involvement with different members of the community becomes pivotal in virtue theory because both habit formation and the setting of one's value takes place at the level of our interaction with other members of the community and their reactions to our actions.

The objective of Socratic dialogue is for the group to reach consensus, not as an aim in itself but as a means to deepen the investigation. Philippart (2003) refers to consensus on values, principles and ideas. Socratic dialogue requires only adherence to basic guidance as set out in Figure 1.

The last basic rule (striving for consensus) is also examined by Houston (2003) in his discussion on the Habermasian model. As Socratic dialogue places the importance of consensus as being central to the process, it can therefore provide a framework for developing some of the social work virtues through collective practical reasoning in groups.

Socratic dialogue therefore appears to be a relevant tool for undertaking practical reasoning and, ultimately, helps to develop virtuous character traits among participants. However, as McBeath and Webb (2002) point out in relation to virtue ethics, a differentiation must be made between two types of virtues, namely the 'intellectual' virtues and the 'moral' virtues. Socratic dialogue is a way of developing 'moral' virtues such as liberality and temperance, as it provides participants with opportunities to examine their experience through collective practical reasoning.

- The Socratic Dialogue normally uses the following procedures:
- A well formulated, complex question, or a statement, is set by the lecturer before the group activity begins (for example: what does social justice mean in the social work context?)
 - The first step is to collect examples experienced by participants in which the given topic plays a key role
 - One example is chosen by the group, which will usually be the basis of the analysis and argumentation throughout the dialogue
 - Crucial statements made by the participants are written down on a flip chart or board, so that all can have an overview of the discourse
 - Using counter examples, participants attempts to find inconsistencies in the discourse
 - Participants must strive to reach consensus
- (Adapted from Saran and Neisser, 2004; Morrell, 2004; Khron, 2005)

Figure 1 Socratic Dialogue Procedures.

On the other hand, MacIntyre (1999) suggests that ‘intellectual’ virtues can be nurtured only through education. In order to develop intellectual virtues, it is therefore necessary that social workers and students alike are also exposed to a variety of theories of philosophy, sociology, psychology and ethics. Indeed, Osmo and Landau (2006) also assert that social work students should be taught critical thinking together with ethical theories in order to develop better arguments for their decision-making processes. The use of Socratic dialogue as a means for collective practical reasoning, in addition to lectures, for example on critical thinking, value bases, moral philosophy and the different ways of conceptualizing power and empowerment, has the potential to create opportunities for developing both intellectual and moral virtues as identified by McBeath and Webb (2002). It is precisely through combining practical reasoning activities with providing opportunities to students to develop an understanding of different theoretical frameworks that the development of virtues in McBeath and Webb’s sense becomes achievable. However, while some distinctions between the types of virtues can be useful, ‘the categorisation often used may tie that particular virtue concept to a rather narrow field of operation’ (Banks and Gallagher, 2009, p. 60). Therefore, the discussion that follows will not attempt to make any specific distinctions between the different types of virtues per se, but instead, will examine a model for teaching values and ethics based on a combination of lectures, group discussions and Socratic dialogue which can potentially enable students to develop virtuous character traits (Banks and Gallagher, 2009, pp. 94–95). The second part of this article will also highlight practical applications of this model to teaching and examine some of the outcomes of such a teaching model in light of module evaluation questionnaires.

Undergraduate Social Work Module on Values and Ethics

A combination of weekly Socratic dialogue activities and lectures were developed and integrated into a Level One undergraduate social work module on values and ethics

at Coventry University. This module is usually delivered during the first semester of the social work degree and accommodates a large number of students, that is, between 70 and 80. The module has so far been delivered under this model for two consecutive years and has been proven, according to module evaluation, to be successful. Figure 2 shows an example of the format used for each session.

The teaching style used in this module is distinctive. It is based on a combination of lectures, which cover the central theme for that week, alongside group discussions based on the principles of Socratic dialogue explored above. However, unlike most university teaching, the lecture comes after the Socratic dialogue group discussion. Socratic dialogue precedes the lecture so that participants, drawing from their personal and professional experience, can collectively and critically reason on the topic as opposed to discussing a theory learned during a led lecture. This enables students to look at their own experience in order to answer the Socratic dialogue question posed, instead of discussing abstract concepts learned in class.

The first session of the module is used to introduce the module learning outcomes, the method of assessment and the pedagogical approach that will be used throughout. The first session is also dedicated to forming base groups of seven or eight students, who will be working together for the whole of the 13-week module and will be sharing the facilitation of the Socratic dialogue sessions each week. It is also during this first session that students are taught about the principles and process of Socratic dialogue, and also attempt their first Socratic dialogue session, supported by two tutors who assist the groups and who demonstrate examples of Socratic dialogue discussions.

From week two onwards, the facilitation role in each of the 'base groups' is shared among the participants. The facilitator's role is to help the groups keep to task and to enable them to generalize on abstract principles underlying the question. The role of the facilitator is set out clearly during the first lecture, and the tutors demonstrate how facilitation should be done. The sharing of the facilitation also enables students to develop transferable skills in group work, an element recognized as important

9.00	<u>Introduction</u> : plan and topic of the session, learning outcomes (15 minutes)
9.15	<u>Socratic Dialogue</u> : the question will be aiming at deliberating in relation to the main topic of the session (1 hour) (example: 'what does self-determination of service users really mean in Social Work practice?')
10.15	Break
10.30	<u>Lead lecture</u> : examination of theoretical concepts related to the subject matter (example: Kant, Kantian Ethics and Kantian legacy in social work practice, Kantian elements of the GSCC, BASW and IFSW codes of ethics)
11.40	<u>Reflection break</u> : developing practical applications and examination of the 'consensus' reached during the Socratic dialogue and the lead lecture (example: group discussion about applications of Kantian ethics in Social Work, examining strengths, weaknesses and way forward)
12.00	End

Figure 2 Integration of Socratic Dialogue in Social Work Teaching: An Example.

in social work training (DoH, 2002). The students' facilitation of their own group also frees up the teaching staff to respond to group difficulties and to take on the facilitation of one group per week in order to establish good facilitation techniques.

Many authors claim that Socratic dialogue is possible as long as the given guidance is carefully integrated into the work of the participant (Leal, 2005; Khron, 2005; Gronke, 2005), as presented in Figure 2 above. The potential of Socratic dialogue as a pedagogy in higher education is therefore enormous, as it requires little in terms of resource mobilization since the process is relatively simple. However, Boers (2005) and Kessels (2005) explain that the involvement of various stakeholders can aid practical reasoning in Socratic dialogue, and this has the potential to be costly in terms of resource mobilization. Within the model developed for the present module, Socratic dialogue groups are composed only of students in a classroom setting and, because of the resources implications, do not involve service users and carers, social work professionals or any other stakeholders. Nonetheless, the students themselves come from a variety of life and professional backgrounds, some being employment-based, some others full-time students, some having been carers and some others having themselves been users of social care services, and therefore all still benefit from being exposed to a variety of experiences and values.

The focus and topic of each individual session varies from week to week, but the format remains the same for the whole of the module. Each session covers one particular topic from the realm of philosophy, sociology and ethics as relevant to social work. Examples of topics covered during the module include 'utilitarian ethics' [Socratic dialogue (SD) question: to what extent are we responsible for the consequences of our actions?] and 'social work processes and principles of intervention' (SD question: to what extent is professionalism about rule-following?). Socratic dialogue can cover a range of topics, as Morrell (2004, p. 388) explains:

[Socratic dialogue] can be revealing about structures as well as rhetoric. For example, in many roles, status and authority are traditionally understood as dependent on a notion of expertise (Baldwin, 1995, p. 380). Inquiry that identifies frequently unquestioned assumptions (such as the belief that one can say what expertise is) could highlight how some truth claims rest on value judgments, or social structures (Illich *et al.*, 1997). In extremis this is seen in the idea that knowledge only makes sense in a given discursive practice (Foucault, 1979, 2002).

The topics covered within this module are chosen in order to meet the learning outcomes, but other topics could be included in order to accommodate different aims and objectives. Such theoretical material is covered during the lectures in order to allow students to develop critical analysis. For example, Yelaja (1982, cited in Morelock, 1997) strongly recommends that moral philosophy is included in teaching as opposed to simple applications of codes of practice. Indeed, a code of practice can provide students with an overall value base for social work, but it would also need to be critically examined and discussed from a practical reasoning standpoint. Looking at moral theories during the lecture enables students to be critical when looking at a code of ethics and to understand its philosophical underpinning when using it. This is also

supported by Bisman (2004), who claims that critical social work should not rely on ethical rules for guidelines or on the social sciences for expertise but on a better grasp of the complexities of moral concepts.

However, in addition to teaching theories during the lecture, it is also important to enable students to relate theory to practice, and thus, a third part of the session is used as a workshop to develop praxes on the topic. The last part of each session is therefore dedicated to looking back at the discussion that emerged in the Socratic dialogue group in relation to what was subsequently covered during the lecture and in relation to practical applications. For example, a session on Kantian ethics begins with a Socratic dialogue session on the topic of 'what does self-determination of an individual mean?', which is then furthered by a lecture on Kantian ethics, maxims and principles, as well as Kantian ethics in relation to social work practice. This is then finally concluded with a further short practical seminar where students are asked to work in small groups and critically examine the code of practice published by the General Social Care Council, to identify which headings or articles can be read in light of Kantian principles and how the discussion of them in the Socratic dialogue session can be read in light of such principles. Other practical activities for the third part of the session include the use of case studies and wider discussions on contemporary issues in social work or society as a whole.

The module has so far been evaluated once, as a second round of the module is currently being delivered in 2007–2008. The final section of this article will examine some of the findings from the module evaluation that took place in 2006–2007.

Module Evaluation and Reflections on Teaching and Learning

In addition to the standard evaluation questionnaire provided by the university as part of quality assurance procedures, the module was also assessed qualitatively through a module evaluation feedback form. This qualitative questionnaire was prepared by the module leader in order to evaluate the first year of implementation of the new module based on the combination of Socratic dialogue activities and lectures. Not only did the questions cover topics such as the use of ICT and the library, and the quality and content of the lectures, but also the students' experience of Socratic dialogue as well as their overall satisfaction with the module. Out of 61 module evaluation forms, 56 were returned.

Although the lectures were of a theoretical nature, students overall felt that they remained appealing and relevant to social work practice. Six students, however, felt that the material was hard to grasp and that not every lecture held their interest in the same way as the group discussions or the Socratic dialogues. One student notes, 'I found it difficult to grasp [theories] at time, although the content [of the lectures] has enabled me to view my practice in a different light' (Module evaluation 33). The difficulty of relating theory to practice appeared, for the seven students who expressed this concern, to be readdressed by the second half of the module (n5). This may be because students at the beginning of the module had just started their social work course and for some this module constituted their first experience of university

teaching. Therefore, after the first six weeks, these students felt more settled and receptive to theories than they had at the beginning, when they may have occasionally found the experience overwhelming.

As a result of this feedback, and in the context of the six-year periodic review having taken place in 2008, the course team decided to move and adapt this module to the second year of the course. In this sense, the module will now allow for students to engage with the module with further personal and professional experience of social work, and having one full year of study with their cohort, which may help with the overall level of cohesion in the group, thus, facilitating the sharing of experience between the students. In addition, this move from Level 1 to Level 2 will also complement the use of Socratic dialogue sessions that have also been implemented in the context of the 'recall days'¹ at Level 3 since 2007, as providing a more constant experience of using Socratic dialogue throughout the degree course. Furthermore, the module and recall days will now fully be 'wrapped' around the different practice learning opportunities, allowing for greater opportunity for students to develop links between theory and practice. This new programme will be launched in 2009–2010 and further evaluation will be undertaken accordingly.

Despite the fact that some students found the material difficult to grasp, 38 students commented on their ability to make links between some of the theories learnt in class and their practice or personal experience, even at Level 1. Students also noted that some of the lectures were 'thought-provoking' (Module evaluation 3) and challenged their personal perceptions and views (n28). One student commented on the fact that 'the lectures were useful and interesting and they did change my perspectives as I learnt things I hadn't considered before' (Module evaluation 26). Therefore, while some students felt that the material covered during the lecture was challenging, a good proportion expressed that the material covered during the lectures enabled them to challenge their practice as well as their personal views.

In relation to the Socratic dialogue sessions, the students expressed diverse opinions. Overall, most enjoyed their Socratic dialogue group discussions (n46) and found them relevant to social work practice. As with the material covered during the lectures, seven students felt that the gains they made during the Socratic dialogue sessions were more valuable after a few weeks. Five students noted some difficulties in engaging with the Socratic dialogue sessions earlier on, mostly due to their limited experience of social work before enrolling on the degree course. However, the same students said that, as the weeks went on, they felt more comfortable with each other and open to more personal experiences. Although the importance of personal experience was emphasized as being as equally important as professional experience, two students felt less inclined to discuss personal experience in groups.

Personal commitment was also identified as an important factor in the success of Socratic dialogue discussion groups. One student explained:

I loved [Socratic dialogue]. My group, though, was not very committed to it I thought, and I found this very annoying. However, I am now using Socratic dialogue with old work colleagues which they too find useful and enjoy. We did this

in practice and we had a positive relationship. Socratic dialogue is a wonderful tool and it helps you make things clear. (Module evaluation 36)

Students also emphasized that Socratic dialogue helped them to develop a better understanding of the theory covered during the lecture. One student explained that ‘participating in the Socratic dialogue first, before the lecture, was beneficial as it helped me understand the theory. I also feel if the theory was presented first, the discussions would have revolved around those rather than our personal experience’ (Module evaluation 48). Similar comments were found on many questionnaires (n18) and reinforce the rationale for the Socratic dialogue to precede the lecture. Another student stressed that ‘the Socratic dialogue sessions really helped me to understand the theoretical ideals learnt in the lecture in a more practical and real-world sense’ (Module evaluation 2).

In relation to whether the format presented above enables students to develop personal qualities or virtues, the module evaluation still lacks evidence, and so it remains difficult to draw robust conclusions on this aspect. However, some students reported an increase in their personal confidence and critical analysis. One student stated that the module overall ‘has been really valuable and important to my practice. It has helped me to reflect and develop theoretical knowledge. I have found that practice follows theory, which has resulted in an increase in my confidence’ (Module evaluation 29). Another student noted: ‘It has changed my perception of thinking. Some of my personal experiences have become skills as opposed to being inadequacies as I always saw them before—it has helped me reframe things’ (Module evaluation 38). Another student noted that their participation in the Socratic dialogue groups ‘has made [me] more balanced’ (Module evaluation 36). Students also felt that, overall, the material covered in the module prepared them well for practice (Module evaluations 33 and 25). One student noted: ‘I found the material relevant and it has enabled me to focus on my placement and where the theory would fit in practice’ (Module evaluation 25). It was also noted that the module prepared students well for future learning as well as furthered their personal growth (Module evaluation 26).

Confidence, retrospection and critical analysis may therefore be some of the personal qualities or virtues needed in social work, but further research is needed to identify whether student social workers are indeed aided in developing virtuous character traits by participating in this type of module. Indeed, there may be other experiences not connected to the module that may have encouraged students to develop these qualities independently from their participation in Socratic dialogue. Nevertheless, the teaching approach explored in this article has been reviewed positively by students. Indeed, at the end of the questionnaire, students were asked to summarize their experience of the module in one sentence. Among the responses received, the module was qualified by statements such as ‘very relevant and challenging’ (Module evaluation 19), ‘[an] excellent way of making us good social workers’ (Module evaluation 37), ‘a wonderful module’ (Module evaluation 29), ‘fascinating’, ‘very enriching’ (Module evaluation 28) and ‘enlightening, empowering and brilliant’ (Module evaluation 54).

This module evaluation suggests that this framework can inform curricula development as well as new ways to educate social workers in ethical practice. Some of the feedback collected refers to the development of personal qualities such as critical analysis, the capacity for reflection, and confidence—virtues that are potentially suitable to social work practice.

Socratic dialogue has been explored as a potential tool for students to develop their practical reasoning abilities, which, according to MacIntyre (1999), leads to the development of virtues. However, further module evaluations are needed to hopefully reveal the skills the students feel they have developed as well as to verify the types of, and the extent to which, virtues are developed through student participation in these types of educational programme. In the meantime, the present model offers on a theoretical level early promise of a practical means of enabling students to develop virtues for ethical social work practice.

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Note

- [1] 'Recall days' are full days at university whereby students are invited back from their 100 day supervised practice learning experience and attend six workshops, usually once every month. The recall days usually focus on different themes such as social work theory, linking theory to practice, anti-oppressive practice, service user/carers' perspectives and critical reflection. These workshops are delivered under the same model as the one examined in this article.

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