Linking theory with practice

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It is important for students and educators to understand how they learn best and what areas they need to develop to ensure their learning is holistic. Honey and Mumford's (1992 cited in Lister, 2012, p. 6) Learning Styles Questionnaire is a useful way of identifying your learning style but it is important to ensure that you understand this is not static, you will need to try different ways of reflecting and learning across these spectrums. It is also important to know what type of learning style your Practice Educator has so you can appreciate now best to approach learning and reflection.

Learning Style	Learn Best where:	Learn least from:
Activists: -Involve themselves fully -Operate in here & now -Like new challenges -May bore quickly	-there is new challenge -thrown in at deep end -diverse activities exist	-passive learning activities -solitary work -analysing synthesising data
Reflectors: -Perspective taking -Thoroughly analyse data cautious	-time allowed to think -carry out research -produce analysis	-being forced into limelight -not given time to plan -given insufficient data
Theorists: -Integrate observations into logical theories -Like to analyse and synthesis -Detached and analytical	-given time to explore a problem -intellectually stretched -analysing and generalising	-unstructured activity -set a problem without context -lack of depth in subject matter
Pragmatists: -keen to try new ideas -experimental -like to get on with things	-clear links between task and subject -techniques which provide advantage -given opportunities to practice	-learning not related to needs -when no practice guidelines -cannot see sufficient rewards for the learning activity

Honey and Mumford (1992 cited in Lister 2012, p. 6)

It is also useful to complete the VARK questionnaire online with your Practice Educator to help you understand each other's learning preferences.

http://vark-learn.com/the-vark-questionnaire/

What is reflection?

Reflection in learning is a cyclical and continuous process which involves experiencing an event, returning to it, reflecting on it and in doing so attending to feelings, identifying learning and then re-evaluating the experience
Lishman 2012, p. 16.

Summarising research on what reflective thinking is Walker (2011 pp. 90-91) points out several important elements needed;

- Intellectual activity – thinking
- Affective activity – feeling or experiencing emotions
- Using these to explore and find out more about experiences
- The result, which should be different and fresh ways of thinking

It requires deep approaches to learning involving;

- Questioning, finding out different perspectives, uncertainty, contradictions
- Using self-awareness and emotional intelligence
- Developing new understandings to professional practice

Critical Reflection is something that Cottrell (2011, p. 208-210) describes as requiring time and space to clarify our thinking, deepen understanding and reinforcing learning in ways that lead to transformation and change. This latter part is key for it to be *critical* reflection; <u>does it lead to change and transformation</u>? There is a need to select an experience to reflect on, return to the experience, analyse your own role in this, draw on received wisdom and deepen your understanding using new insights to effect change.

Applying Theory to Practice

Drawing on received wisdom is something which is vital within critical reflection making use of what theory, research and professional knowledge exists to aid deeper understandings and positive transformations in our practice. Social work is not a common sense profession; without reflection practice can become unthinking, routinized, proceduralistic and oppressive (Wilson, 2013). Curiosity into knowledge and practice and what meaning can be made of situations and best suited interventions is essential.

Fook (2012, p. 44) argues there are many different meanings of theory and the important thing is we do not cut ourselves off from useful ideas so there is an important need to be inclusive.

Theory is defined by Payne (2014, p. 5) as a set of generalised ideas that describes and explains our knowledge of the world around us in an organised way. A social work theory is one that helps us to do or to understand social work. He helpfully makes certain distinctions. Differences of knowledge and theory for example, where theory involves thinking about something whereas knowledge is a description of reality and seen as true. Theory is different from practice as theory is thinking when practice is doing. However theory helps us explain knowledge and practice.

There are theories to explain what is being observed. This can therefore aid our knowledge of what is going on and there are theories to intervene therefore aiding the way we approach practice, Collingwood et al. (2008).

There are different levels of theoretical approaches Walker (2011, p. 29) cites;

- Grand or Macro Theories which look at global or national explanations as to what occurs in society or all human behaviour. Examples of this include risk society, neoliberalism, Marxism.
- Middle-range theories focusing on a limited range of issues such as labelling theory where there are social interactions explaining deviance.
- Micro theories develop and explain small scale situations for example relationship based theories looking at interactions between individuals.

Cottrell (2011, p. 211) points out that we need to select a model of reflection which will aid this process of increasing our understandings and bringing in received wisdom to this process and theorising what we are doing and why we are doing it is essential.

The remainder of this section therefore will provide useful reflective tools and approaches you can select and use to enable you to think more deeply, become more self-aware, understand practice and knowledge and aid change and transformation in your practice.

Using Critical Incident Analysis

A 'critical incident' is any incident which makes a particular impact or impression on the staff concerned. It is something we view as a problem or a challenge over and above usual practice experience (Osterman and Kottkamp 2004 cited in Bassot, 2013, p. 38). Critical incidents are often the most productive times for learning and reflection and help expose gaps in our knowledge (Lam et al. 2007).

To undertake a critical incident analysis you need to record the incident in detail and then ask questions:

What happened in the incident?
Why did it happen as it did?
What other conceptual frameworks could help understand the incident?
What different perspectives could you adopt to view this incident?

This can be done either as an individual or group exercise.

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle

Concrete Experience

Active Experiementation

Reflective Observation

Abstract Conceptualisation
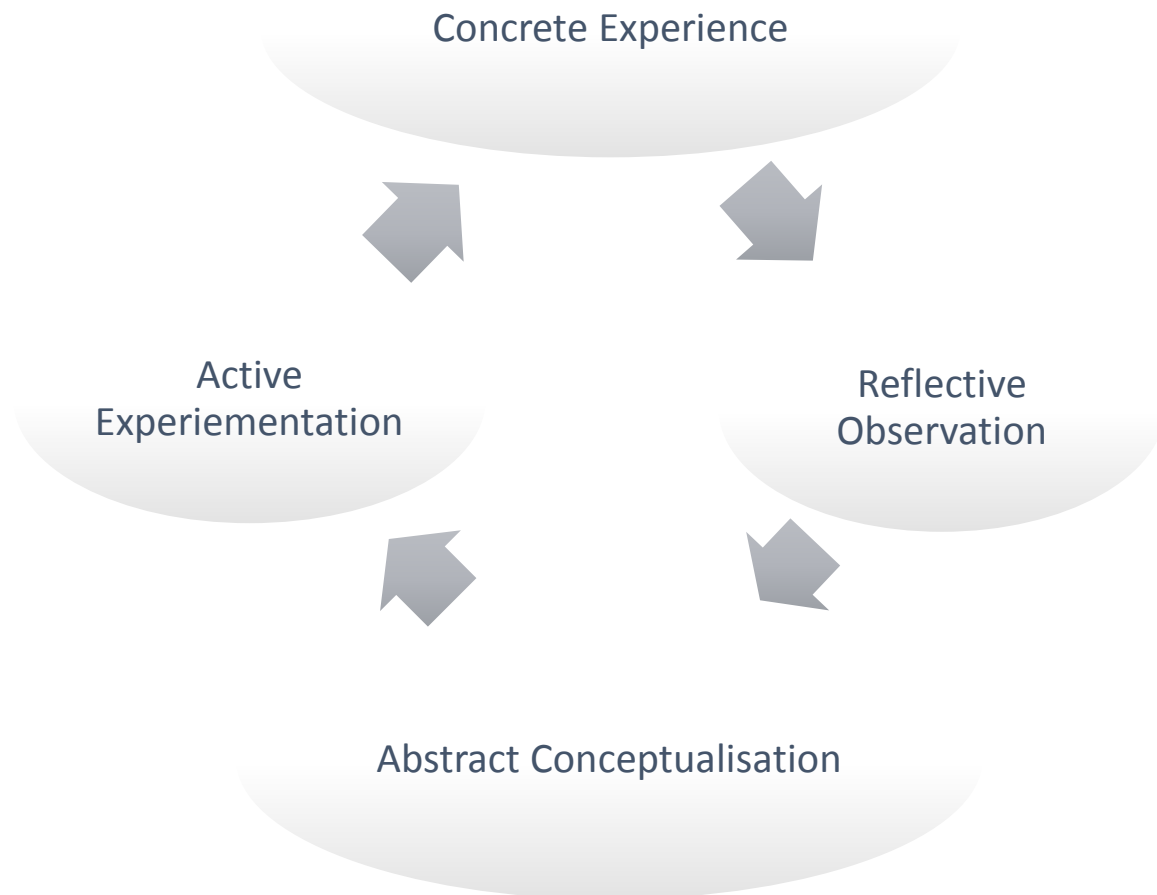
Concrete Experience – what did you do e.g. home visit to share an assessment

Reflective Observation – what went well or did not go so well e.g. did not realise individual had visual impairment and could not see assessment

Abstract Conceptualisation – research and theories around disability and assessment explored including the discrimination and oppression

Active Experimentation – plan what to do next and what change to practice…

Gibbs Model of Reflection (1988)

Action Plan - what would you do differently next time?

Description - What happened?

Feelings - what were you thinking, feeling, name your emotions

Conclusion - what else could you have done?

Evaluation - what went well and what did not got well?

Analysis - making sense, using theory, models and research

Gibbs (1988) is a development on Kolb's (1984) reflective cycle incorporating feelings and emotions, what was the impact of your emotions? This can be linked into reflections on emotional intelligence and awareness of self (Howe 1998 and Morrison 2007).

Knowledge, Skills, Theories and Values Grid

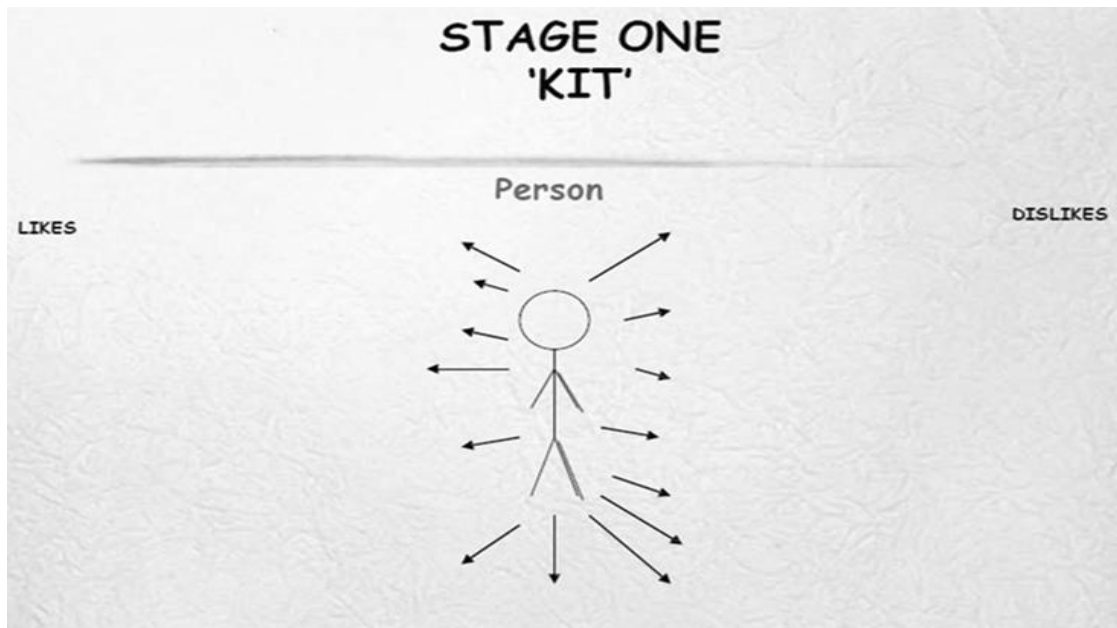| Knowledge	Theories
Values	**Skills**

Field, Jasper and Littler 2014, p. 59

Reflecting on a particular area of practice or an experience note down all the areas you can think which are pertinent to each section.
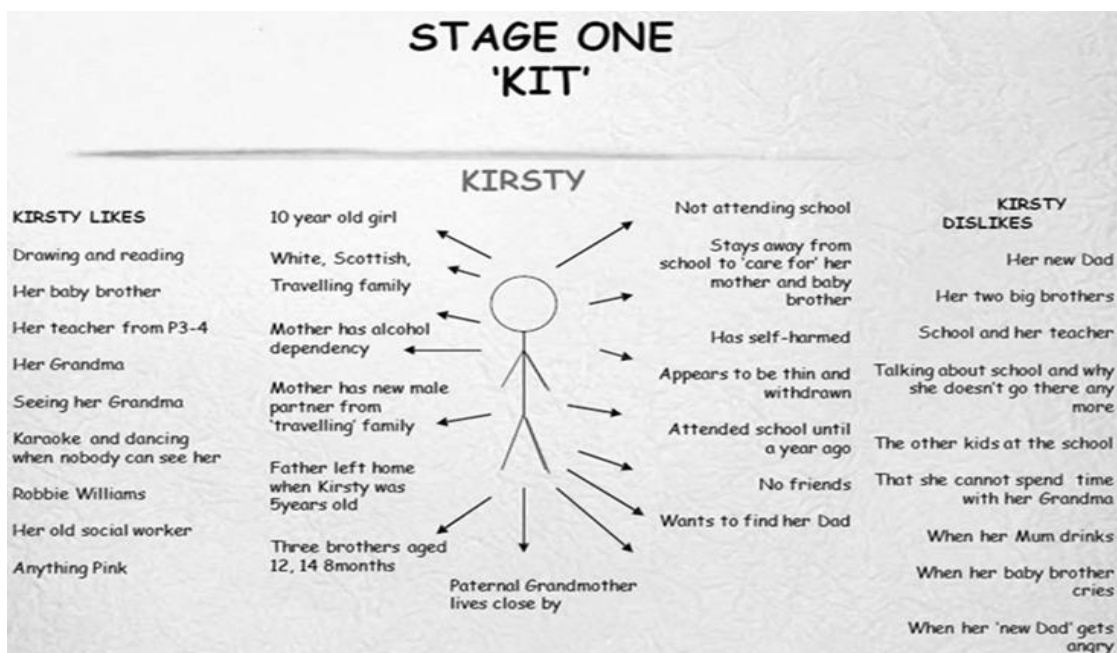
The Theory Circle Tool (Collingwood, Emond and Woodward, 2008)

This tool is a very effective way of reflecting on your practice integrating experience, presenting issues, theory, knowledge, values and skills. It uses 3 stages including;
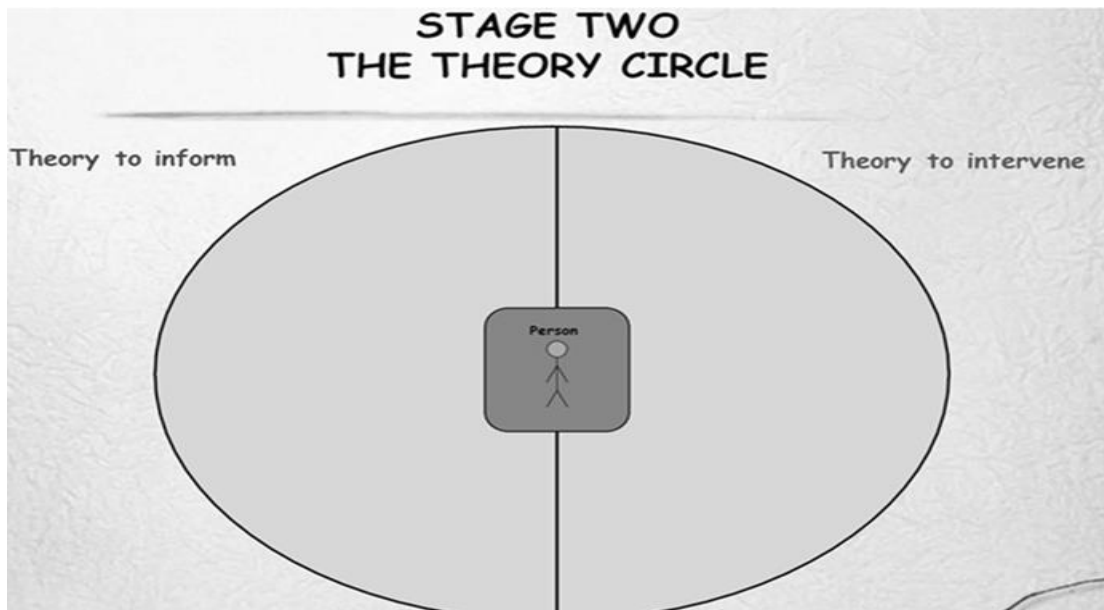
Stage 1: Prepare the Service User profile KIT by filling out the basic profile which should include, age, gender, race, culture, history, family, friends, likes, dislikes, life, events, significant other agency connections, wants, needs…so on. The profile can be drawn up by the student with the service user or in preparation for a Practice Educator reflective session or to aid reflective writing.
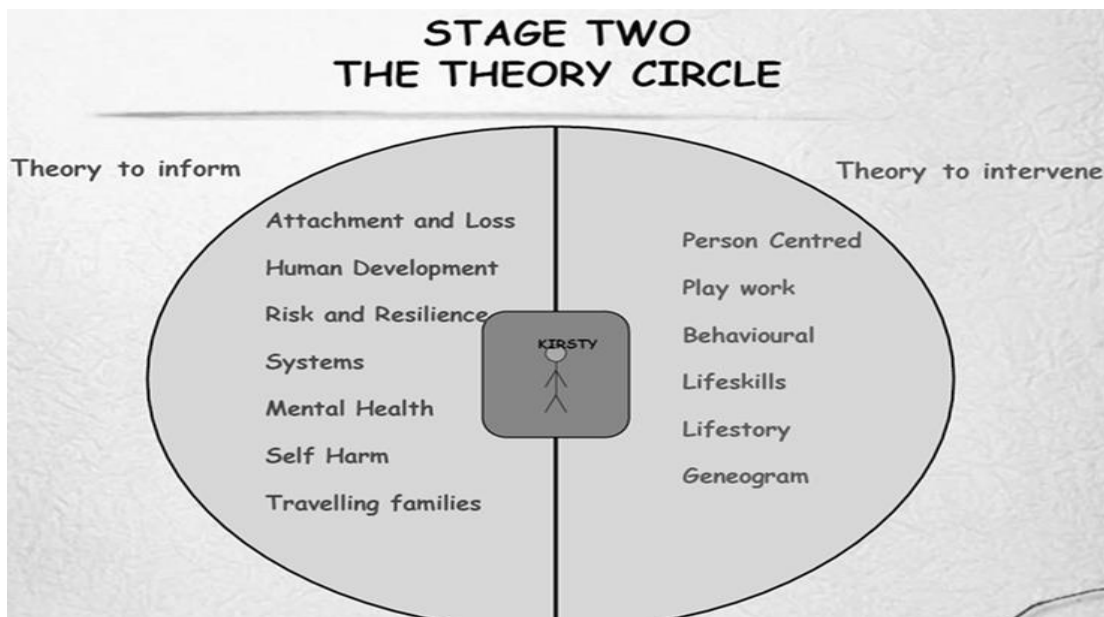
STAGE ONE 'KIT'

Person

LIKES   DISLIKES

Example:

STAGE ONE 'KIT'

KIRSTY

KIRSTY LIKES

Drawing and reading

Her baby brother

Her teacher from P3-4

Her Grandma

Seeing her Grandma

Karaoke and dancing when nobody can see her

Robbie Williams

Her old social worker

Anything Pink

10 year old girl

White, Scottish, Travelling family

Mother has alcohol dependency

Mother has new male partner from 'travelling' family

Father left home when Kirsty was 5years old

Three brothers aged 12, 14 8months

Paternal Grandmother lives close by

Not attending school

Stays away from school to 'care for' her mother and baby brother

Has self-harmed

Appears to be thin and withdrawn

Attended school until a year ago

No friends

Wants to find her Dad

KIRSTY DISLIKES

Her new Dad

Her two big brothers

School and her teacher

Talking about school and why she doesn't go there any more

The other kids at the school

That she cannot spend time with her Grandma

When her Mum drinks

When her baby brother cries

When her 'new Dad' gets angry

Stage 2: This is to aid your thinking around what theories inform you as to what is going on for that service user and explanatory theory and then theories to Intervene.


STAGE TWO
THE THEORY CIRCLE

Theory to inform

Theory to intervene

Person

Example:

STAGE TWO
THE THEORY CIRCLE

Theory to inform

Attachment and Loss
Human Development
Risk and Resilience
Systems
Mental Health
Self Harm
Travelling families

KIRSTY

Theory to intervene

Person Centred
Play work
Behavioural
Lifeskills
Lifestory
Geneogram

Stage 3: Finally the student considers what else has informed their practice including; **Knowledge** legislative frameworks, agency policies and procedures, organisational contexts, resources... **Skills** communication, enabling, assessment, advocacy, report writing... **Values and Ethics** personal and professional values, diversity, difference and power dynamics, oppression and discrimination, ethical perspectives and principles e.g. utilitarian, Kantian, virtue and care ethics.
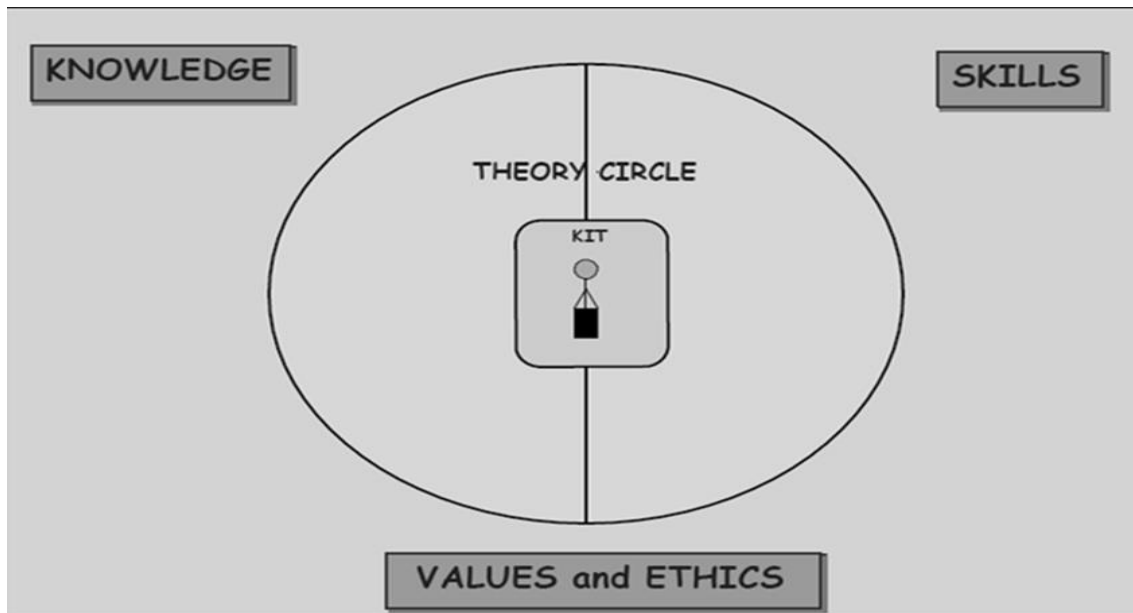
Example:
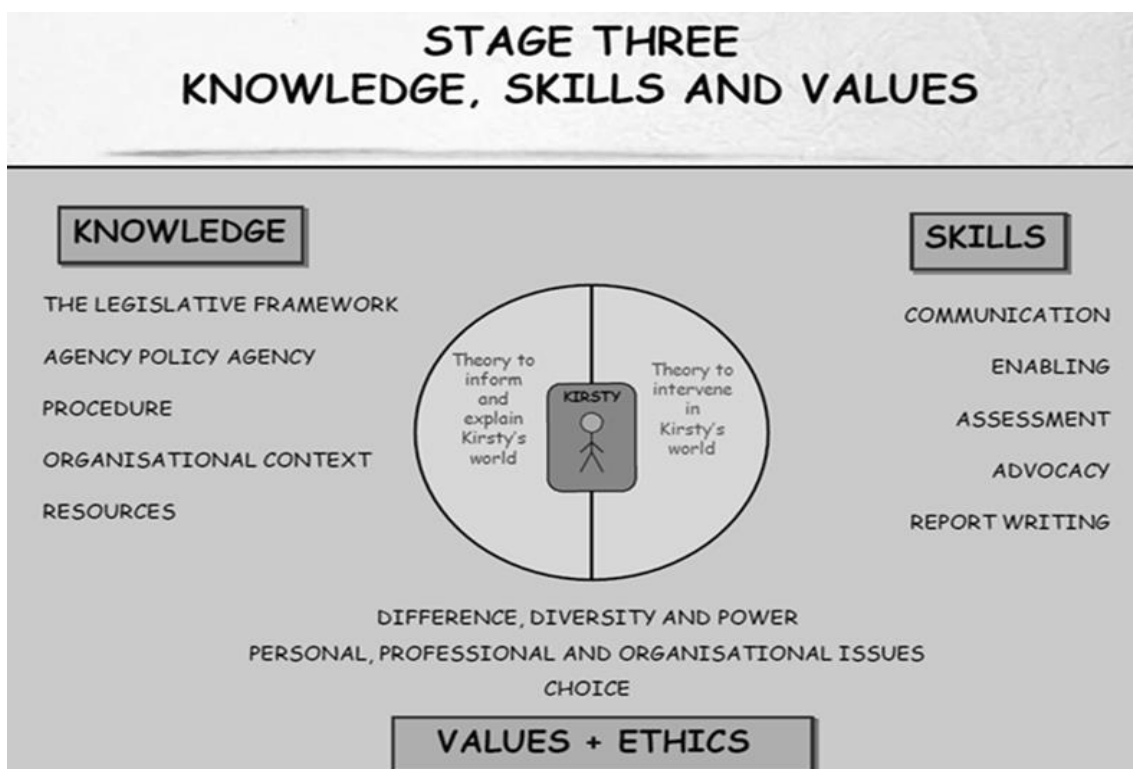
Be creative in your reflections using things to aid this such as sketching out your own ecomaps or mind maps involving your cases and experiences. Using posit notes stuck on large flip chart paper to indicate differing elements of practice and learning. Do not be constrained by models presented here.

The above tools are very useful but don't necessarily advance anti-oppressive practice and challenge power, inequality and discrimination.

Reflexivity is a concept which is defined as the ability to understand where one is coming from and how one's perspective is influenced by ones values, beliefs, cultural norms and life experiences (Jindal-Snape and Hannah 2014 cited in Ingram et al., 2014, p. 29).

Reflexivity has been defined by Fook and Gardner (2007) as the ability to see what you do not usually see, such as other perspectives, impact of our interactions and the way in which power can reinforce unequal social relationships or hierarchies.

Shaw (2013 cited in Ingram et al., 2014, pp. 29-30) has devised questions to aid reflection and reflexivity which you can use;

Q's for critical reflection;
- **What happened?**
- **Why did it happen?**
- **How was I feeling?**
- **What were my assumptions?**
- **What informed these assumptions?**
- **What needs to change?**

Q's for reflexivity?
- **How did I influence what happened?**
- **Why did I behave in that way?**
- **Why might have I felt the way I did during the situation, and now, when reflecting on it?**
- **How has who I am affected my view of what happened, my values, opportunities, life choices, and subsequently my reflections?**
- **What beliefs or ways of challenging my assumptions will allow me to look at this from others perspectives?**

The use of reflection coupled with values and ethics is something that can be achieved through using the Virtue and Care Ethics Reflection Exercise developed from Pullen-Sansfacon and Cowden (2012, p. 169) and is attached to Moodle to help unpick professional boundaries, equality and equity of practice and areas of development.

Critical Social Work Reflection Model (Fook 2012)

This approach is very much based on reflections around power, oppression and social workers role which they may unconsciously play within this and the way to challenge oppression and inequality. The approach has four different stages;

1. Deconstruction – here you question the dominant discourses and identify the contradictions, different perspectives and interpretations e.g. organisational needs and goals versus service user needs and goals. Uncovering discourses such as power and oppression within caring relationships, control, coercion and limited freedoms. Fook (2012, p. 107) has helpfully provided a list of deconstruction questions to help you analyse a particular situation you are reflecting on.

2. **Resistance –** this is questioning the current ways of knowing and doing and those main discourses you identified at stage 1. This stage therefore is resisting or refusing to accept particular aspects of dominant discourses which work to disempower or make a situation unworkable. This is offering other ways of knowing and different perspectives and in itself is a demonstration of resistance. It is resisting the assumptions about power and powerlessness opening them up for scrutiny.

3. **Challenge –** involves the identification and labelling of dominate discourses that exist and that are in operation. Naming missing perspectives allows us to value and account for them, ensuring that they are not taken for granted because of dominant ways of doing things. Naming perspectives in this way is useful to start seeing and challenging dominant discourses 'child's perspective', Linda's perspective', 'organisation perspective', 'carers perspective'.

4. **Reconstruction –** this final stage involves creating new discourses and structures. Naming existing and hidden discourses allows new ones to be created. Discourses need to be reconstructed which change the dominant power relations, which allow silenced, powerless and marginalised perspectives to be heard. This reconstruction stage often requires negotiation.

These tools and reflective models will be made available on Moodle for students to access and use as part of their reflections on practice placements and will be expected to be discussed within Practice Educator sessions. It is important students incorporate these into their reflective writing and academic work, ensuring that they reference correctly which reflective models were used and why they were selected.