Case study Isabella

Isabella is an NQSW in an older people’s team. She has extensive pre-qualification experience as a social care assessor on a similar team. Paul, a lead practitioner in the team, is acting as Isabella's assessor. Sarah is the team manager. Previously Sarah has supported NQSWs through the ASYE. However she and Paul feel that taking on the role of assessor will be valuable for his own development. The learning agreement is drawn up in a meeting attended by Isabella, Paul and Sarah. There is an index of the evidence on page 4 of the learning agreement.

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Evidence development

Paul and Isabella have completed two direct observations of practice. Isabella has demonstrated her capability against a number of specific capability statements within the observations, but Paul feels that Isabella’s practice is procedurally driven. In the discussions following the observation Isabella has focused on seeking feedback from Paul on whether she "got things right". Paul also feels that Isabella responds defensively to any feedback he tries to provide to her on how she could develop her practice.

Paul is becoming concerned that Isabella is not sufficiently reflective and that this impacts on the holistic assessment of her capability. Isabella brings a list of cases to supervision which details her work in terms of processes and the completion of agency documentation - she also brings a few notes about where she wants advice on what action to take. In supervision Isabella tends to take a very passive stance, answering questions with stories of the experiences of the people she is supporting. Paul feels that when Isabella reflects she considers the impact of service provision for and not on the impact of her intervention.

Isabella and Paul have drawn on a number of work products as part of the assessment process. While Paul sees all of Isabella’s assessments as part of the quality assurance in the team, it is these that she brings to supervision for discussion in relation to the PCF.

In the last supervision, Paul asked Isabella to consider bringing a wider variety of evidence to supervision. While she has focused on providing work products as evidence, he suggests that she could also bring some feedback from people who
need care and support, some feedback from colleagues and possibly some brief reflective accounts. Paul also asked Isabella to develop her approach to supervision to be more reflective, suggesting that then supervision notes could also provide useful evidence.

Isabella brought some feedback from the person being supported to the next supervision session for discussion. Paul asked her to reflect on how she might make use of this in developing her future practice. Isabella refers to a lack of resources and the fact that she has done everything possible to provide services for the person in need of care and support, but that the resource panel refused services. She feels that there is nothing she can do - the person should have services but there aren't any available. This reinforces Paul's view that Isabella is procedurally driven and lacks the ability to critically reflect on her own practice.

With the three month review coming up, Paul feels he needs to address his concerns directly. Paul talks to Sarah, the team manager about his concerns. Sarah indicates that she is satisfied with Isabella's practice-particularly as Isabella completes her work within timescales. However, she listens to Paul's concerns. She agrees that it sounds as though Isabella is not evidencing domain 6, 'Critical Reflection and Analysis,' effectively. Paul states that holistically this is having an impact on Isabella's capability in the other domains.

Sarah asks Paul if she can go through the direct observation feedback form that he has completed for Isabella. When Sarah has reviewed this she encourages Paul to consider whether the feedback is specific enough - and points out that he has not made reference to specific capability statements when he raises concerns. Sarah encourages Paul to identify specific capability statements across the domains to enable Isabella to recognise the impact that her lack of reflection is having on her overall capability. Paul recognises that he has not done this in his observation report and agrees that it would be useful. He reflects that being specific about concerns may be especially helpful in light of Isabella's commitment to procedural working. In their discussion Sarah also encourages Paul to reflect on why Isabella may be so procedurally driven. Paul identifies that to some extent this reflects team culture and prevailing organisational concerns. Sarah accepts this but also points out that sometimes, as new workers experience a crisis of confidence in their first year of practice, they look towards what they know and understand-and since reflection can lead to more questions than answers this can be threatening for practitioners who are still developing professional confidence. This really gives Paul something to think about; he has not recognised the way that reflection can be threatening for some people before. Sarah explains that it is therefore important for Paul to balance his concerns with Isabella's strengths. This may enable her to be more open to addressing the concerns.

Sarah also talks to Paul about reflective supervision. She asks him what he thinks might constitute reflective supervision. Paul highlights a range of issues including the use of coaching techniques to support practitioners to reflect on their practice within individual cases and taking a solution focussed approach. Sarah and Paul discuss various options for improving the reflective aspect of supervision. One option they identify is for Sarah to offer case work supervision and Paul to provide separate sessions which focus purely on reflection. Paul says he would like to try to keep the
functions of supervision together at least for the moment - but agrees that if the situation does not change they will work on this option. It is agreed that Paul and Isabella will review their understanding of supervision and draw up a new supervision agreement. Sarah says that when she has previously supported NQSWs she has found that reflecting on feedback from people who need care and support has been particularly helpful in maintaining a reflective focus to supervision.

After his discussion with Sarah, Paul prepares for the three month review by going through each of the domain. He raises Isabella’s strengths while also highlighting his concerns illustrating these with reference to specific capability statements. In working through each of the domains, Paul recognises that Isabella’s lack of skills in critical reflection impacts on many of the specific capability statements.

The three month review
Paul raises his concerns in the review. Isabella has been taking a very traditional competence-based approach to the generation of evidence, which in many ways reflects her procedural approach to practice. Focusing on specific capability statements enables Isabella to recognise the vital importance of critical reflection. She asks Paul for specific support to develop in this area and together they develop an action plan to address the identified learning needs. Isabella reviews her personal development plan in light of discussions at the three month review - adding in the need to develop her reflective practice skills further.

Work against the action plan
Paul is able to arrange for Isabella to attend a workshop on critically reflective practice for social workers and subsequently they discuss this in supervision. Isabella says she found the workshop useful in that a number of models of reflection were presented which made the concept more concrete for her. Paul recognises that he has been discussing reflective practice with Isabella in abstract terms and that he has expected her to integrate critical reflection into all their discussions and all her evidence without being specific about his expectations. Since the expectations around procedures are concrete Isabella has focused on these and subconsciously avoided critical reflection.

In the next direct observation of practice Paul notes that Isabella is much more reflective both in planning for the observation and in the feedback after the observation. She clearly draws on her learning from the workshop-using the process covered in the workshop on reflection for action, reflection in action and reflection on action.

Development of supervision
Paul and Isabella review their understanding of supervision and draw up a reflective supervision agreement. They agree to add a separate agenda item on critical reflection to their supervision. To begin with they agree that they will use a different model of reflection to discuss a particular piece of work at each session. Isabella responds to this and engages fully in these discussions. After three or four sessions Paul asks Isabella to evaluate which of the models she has found most useful and why-he then encourages her to consider the "headings" of this model as part of all her assessments and care planning work. Paul also regularly encourages Isabella to reflect on the feedback she has obtained from people who need care and support.
Reflecting on this within supervision again ensures that the sessions become more reflective in nature. Paul also feels that the centrality of user feedback is much more fully integrated into the holistic assessment process.

In fact, Paul develops his questioning in supervision, drawing on some of the models of reflection which he knows Isabella is familiar with. Over a period of time Isabella becomes more reflective and the whole supervision session becomes more reflective in style. Ultimately Isabella is able to move to a point where she is not only able to reflect on the work she has undertaken but where she also becomes more reflective in preparing for her work- which in turn means her practice becomes less procedural.

The six month review
In reviewing progress against the action plan, Paul asks Isabella for her thoughts on why she had presented so procedurally. Since she is now more reflective, Isabella is confident in responding that she feels her previous work experience was of supervision that focused on managerial concerns around what work had been completed, whether timescales had been met and what work was to be taken on.

While supervision during her practice learning experiences had been more reflective, she had anticipated a change to this as she returned to the work environment where there were significant pressures to "turn work round". She had been somewhat confused by Paul's holistic approach to assessment as all her previous experiences of being assessed had been very mechanistically driven with evidence being requested against specific criteria.

Ultimately, Isabella says that the holistic approach to assessment and Paul's focus on critically reflective practice had created a crisis in confidence for her. She feels that the action plan addressed her anxieties as it detailed specifically where she needed to focus her development and what support she would receive in this. Isabella says that this process and the change in her outlook has enabled her professionalism and helped with recognising the difference between doing a job and being a professional. She has also learnt a great deal about the central importance of reflecting on the experiences of the person being supported and seeking and using feedback in a more holistic way has really helped her to reflect and improve her practice.

Isabella also says that the workshop she attended referred to the concept of critical friends as assisting with the development of critical reflection. She asks if it is possible to formalise some of the support she receives from team colleagues so that she can develop a "critical friendship" within the team. Arrangements are made for this. Paul recognises that Isabella's request demonstrates that she is, in fact, taking responsibility for her own development and that it provides further evidence of her development as a professional.

Summative assessment judgement
Following their work on further developing a critically reflective approach, Paul feels that Isabella has developed her reflective skills and that as a result aspects of the other domains have also developed. For example, Isabella's understanding of professionalism (domain 1), and her ability to critique and therefore improve her practice in all areas, have improved.
Paul is confident that his professional judgement that Isabella should pass the assessed and supported year is valid and robust. On reflection he feels that the process has been one of learning for him as well as Isabella. He found discussing his concerns with the team manager helpful and recognises that in moving towards holistic assessment and seeking to avoid a mechanistic, reductionist approach to assessment he had perhaps made the assessment too abstract and not sufficiently clear for Isabella who had not been used to such an approach before. He recognises that his feedback in the direct observation was poorly supported by evidence of how his concerns related to the PCF.

Reflecting again on the principles of holistic assessment, Paul recognises that in many ways the identification of specific capability statements to be addressed at the three month stage, and the process of action planning and reviewing the action plan, has usefully provided a clear evidence base of Isabella's progression.

Paul concludes that he will take a more detailed approach to the learning agreement in the future - outlining the purpose of reflective supervision in more detail (drawing on the agreement he developed with Isabella), addressing the methods of assessment more clearly (especially highlighting the importance of feedback from people who need care and support) and that he will ensure that he provides more explicit feedback throughout the process. Paul is satisfied that he and Isabella addressed the issues early enough in the process for him to be able to adapt his approach, and reflects that it was useful to involve the team manager in discussing his concerns.

**Links to evidence to go with this case study**
1. Learning agreement
2. Early direct observation of practice showing lack of reflection and procedural approach to practice
3. Preparation for three month review
4. Revised personal development plan
5. Action plan
6. Reflective supervision agreement
7. Review of action plan just prior to six month review