

Purposes of assignments

If you think of your own studies as part of that wider project of making knowledge within your field, how does that help you to approach your assignments? You'll find that many assignments are focussed on the relationship between theory and practice, and that your job is to assess

- how the theory informs your practice as a member of your field,
- and how that practice, in turn, reflects back upon the theory.

What is theory?

Theory is the way that scholars try to make sense of the great variety of experience in their field. They look for patterns from which they can derive generalisations about how and why things happen in the ways that they do. These generalisations are intended to help us understand what we see in practice, and mostly, they do help. However, there may be aspects of practice that are not satisfactorily explained by a theory we're working with. So, although theory and practice work together, they are also, always, potentially in tension with each other. When the theory seems to be inadequate, then scholars ask what might be needed to improve the theory so that it leads to better understanding, and in turn, to better practice? Some of your readings are likely to explore such problems, and you may be asked to evaluate competing ideas that you find there.

What does it mean, then, when you are asked to reflect critically on a theory? It doesn't mean that you have to find fault with it; rather, you need to ask yourself how the theory helps you to understand what you are looking at, and/or what the theory helps you to do. At the same time, you should ask yourself whether there are limits to its usefulness, and if so, why. Your course is designed to help you operate competently in your field of practice, but not just by following the manual. You need to know why particular approaches are recommended, and what problems remain unresolved, and why. Thus, you can approach your assignments more effectively if you recognise that many are designed to raise your awareness of that unstable relationship between theory and practice, with each continually reflecting on and revising the other.

Examples

If we look at some of the assignments students are given at this level, we can see how they are focussed at this interface between theory and practice. (Theory may appear in various forms: as "theory", or as an "approach", or as "the literature", which means the body of scholarly writing on whatever the topic is.)

Foundations of art therapy:

Art therapists approach their practice from various theoretical standpoints, for example, a psychodynamic, gestalt or cognitive-behavioural orientation. Each of these theoretical approaches has differing assumptions or emphases about such things as: how we develop knowledge (or epistemology), the place of art in our lives, how personal change takes place and the structure of the psyche.

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Resource Developed by Kate Chanock – c.chanock@latrobe.edu.au

In this paper you are asked to focus on two approaches to art therapy which hold some interest for you and to **compare and contrast** these in light of:

- (i) how the ideas of each art therapy approach developed historically,
- (ii) their key theoretical underpinnings (eg in a psychoanalytic approach the structure of the personality and the role of the unconscious is one defining element),
- (iii) an example of how this approach may be used in an art therapy session
- (iv) issues you think may arise when applying each art therapy approach within a cross cultural context and,
- (v) what attracted you to these two approaches in particular

Maternal and Child Health: Introduction to Practice

Promoting child development is a major component of maternal and child health nursing practice. Using relevant literature to support your work, discuss the role of the maternal and child health nurse in promoting optimal development of children.

Intercultural Communication and Education (EDU5CCU)

Task 3: Essay - "Identity, culture and communication are complex issues. Discuss in relation to theory and the notion of intercultural competence." (2000 words)

Community Development

Community development is a neo-liberal ideology that redirects attention away from fair distribution of resources. Discuss.

"Discuss" may just mean "explain", or more often, it may (as in the last example) mean something like "Here is a view that could be held about an issue explored in this course. Explain

- What it means
- Why it is held (what is it based on?)
- What has been said about it in the scholarly literature
- In what ways/to what extent is it true of a particular example(s) you focus on in your assignment
- What other view(s) might make better sense in connection with the example(s) you focus on?"

You might wonder why, if that's what it means, the assignment doesn't just say so! But at least, now you have some questions to guide you in your research and writing.

Not only does it help to make sense of your assignments if you're aware of the underlying purpose of making knowledge in your discipline. It also makes sense of the way that sources are used in both your reading and your writing, and it makes sense of the ways that texts are structured – both the texts you read, and the ones you write. We'll look now at each of these areas in turn.