

IDEAS IN ACTION

Service User Involvement in Social Work Education: A Case Example

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The financial resources provided by the General Social Care Council (GSCC) which supports the education and registration of social workers, has allowed for an increase in user involvement in social work programmes in England and Wales. This article discusses the sources of knowledge appropriate for social workers and social care workers including the significance of the service user knowledge base for social work theory and practice. A project is described which involved students in a consultation process with service users whose role it was to contribute to the students' learning in a particular area, specifically understanding their experience of social workers and the issues of discrimination which they faced and the processes which were helpful in resisting oppression.

Keywords: Service User Involvement; Anti-discriminatory Practice; Social Work Knowledge; User Participation

The decision in England and Wales by the General Social Care Council (GSCC), which supports the education and registration of social workers, to provide funds for each social work programme to resource the involvement of service users in social work education, has opened up new opportunities for widening the knowledge base of social work education. This article begins by situating service user knowledge within the broader context of the knowledge base for social workers and then moves on to discuss a specific project developed at the University of Warwick to involve service users in the course.

Sources of Knowledge for Social Work

Unsurprisingly, the claims to knowledge within any profession are often deeply contested. A claim to knowledge is a claim to power (Foucault, 1980) and therefore lies at the political heart of a profession. Who is allowed to speak, for whom and with

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what authority and influence point to the issues which are central to the development of professional discourse and the role of knowledge/power in producing formulations of 'the truth' which structure the way in which we come to 'see', know and name ideas and concepts.

The derivative nature of the knowledge base for social work has meant that 'what counts' as knowledge for social workers has always been contested, and has often left the profession with an insecurity about the nature of its foundational knowledge. This has been translated into queries about the extent to which it can be regarded as 'a proper' profession in which workers are able to draw upon a theoretical and evidence base to inform their everyday practice. The knowledge base is therefore a central, not a peripheral issue for social workers and one which social work educators grapple with when attempting to translate the contested base for social work into an appropriate curriculum.

The debates about the knowledge base for social work have been part of recent critical discussions evident in published articles (Webb, 2001; Sheldon, 2001), and a project commissioned by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (Pawson *et al.*, 2003). In particular, concerns have been expressed about whether a hierarchy of knowledge should apply which reflects priorities within the health sector where evidence based practice has strongly supported the 'gold standard' of the empirically based, randomised trial as the preferred basis for evidence for practice.

Alternative ideas have been circulated in social work and social care in which it has been argued that in an applied profession there are equally valid sources of evidence. This has been strongly argued by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and 'Making Research Count' (Humphreys *et al.*, 2003) where it was proposed that the different sources of knowledge included a triangle of sources drawn from research, service users and practitioners. However, a classification system has been further developed which expands these three areas to include knowledge from five different sources (Pawson *et al.*, 2003, pp. 15–16). These sources include:

- organisational knowledge which provides the framework for regulation and governance in social care and includes information drawn from audit, inspection, joint reviews and inquiries;
- practitioner knowledge drawn from those working in social care which tends to be personal and context specific, though can be written down in training materials and professional networks;
- service user knowledge based on first hand experience and reflection on intervention. Again this knowledge is often personal and not written down, though there is now an emerging literature based on user led research, and campaigning materials;
- research knowledge based on empirical enquiries drawing on a wide range of different methodologies. This form of knowledge is more accessible and available through journals, books and research reports;
- policy community knowledge which sets social care in its policy context and where the literature is formulated in policy reports, white papers, think pieces and critiques of policy.

Pawson *et al.* (2003) stress that there is not a hierarchy of knowledge. Each is of value to the social work/social care knowledge base, though it does not preclude an assessment or judgement about the quality of information within each source area.

While a schema such as this is particularly relevant to conceptualising the current knowledge base for social work and social care, strong arguments have been made that, to date, service user knowledge has been marginalised and under-valued even in the area of anti-oppressive practice where such knowledge should be of particular relevance (Wilson & Beresford, 2000). The steps by the GSCC to fund user involvement in social work education programmes appear to be steps to correct an aspect of the current lack of balance and lack of acknowledgement of the value of user knowledge for social work practice.

Context and History

The University of Warwick social work programme has had a history of involving service users in teaching on the course through giving lectures or seminars, and is exemplified by one of the lecturers being highly commended for a teaching award based on the creative involvement of a group of young service users in the child care course. As with other programmes throughout England and Wales, we have also developed mechanisms through which representatives from service user organisations are involved in the process of admissions, curriculum development and represented as a stakeholder group in the oversight of the programme.

The project described is therefore only one part of a wider involvement of service users on the social work programme. It grew out of developments in an already established course, *Individual in Society*, in which alongside a lecture and seminar series, students spent a term working in small groups looking at the ways in which discrimination, oppression and resistance affected a particular group of service users whose experience they chose to explore. This then culminated in a group presentation or seminar. Occasionally, students with good connections to service user organisations or individual service users would involve them in their learning process. Generally, however, students worked together through using the literature and visiting and consulting with professionals in the area they had identified.

The financial resource provided by the GSCC allowed for the development of the original course to include service users in a much more systematic way. Work began six months prior to the start of the first term, on identifying six service user groups who would be prepared to act as consultants to the first term project undertaken by the 35 first year students. Extra assistance was gained by employing a social worker/consultant who has been consistently involved with the course as a tutor and casual lecturer for some extra days of work. Thus, the lengthy process of contacting service user organisations and discussing the project could be shared with the course co-ordinator.

Decisions were made at this stage about approaching groups so that a diverse range of service users would be represented. When the numbers are limited, clearly the process of who is to be approached in the first instance includes and excludes some

potential groups. Our voluntary stakeholder organisations were consulted for advice, and local organisations which were pro-active themselves around user-involvement were given priority. An important consideration was that there should be a broad coverage of issues which were relevant to the course.

Negotiations were protracted, and the time and resources required to establish the groups were under-estimated. Generally, this was not because agencies were reluctant, in fact the opposite. However, the process of setting up a meeting with a co-ordinator, in some cases setting up a second meeting with the service user group who would be involved in the consultation, discussing the project, sending out a description of the project, writing a 'contract' to confirm the agency's involvement and university expectations, and organising the logistics of how and when students would visit the group, was a lengthy process. Finally, and one week into the beginning of the first term, six groups confirmed involvement. These included: a refugee group; a group of domestic violence survivors; a disabled people's group; a mental health forum of service users; young people involved in a housing project; and a group of Asian carers.

The Consultation Process

At the beginning of the course, students were given information about the different agencies involved in the project. They were then asked to sort themselves into six groups to work with the different service user groups. This process was also used to ask students to explore the process of group formation and provided the first step in reflective learning about groups. At different stages throughout the term, students continued to explore and identify group processes and the skills required to work in groups, so that some attention was given to supporting the group learning as part of their participation in this course. Lectures on the history and processes of user-involvement and anti-oppressive practice were also part of the course.

Students were given the project brief, part of which includes the following description:

In conjunction with an identified group of service users or carers, explore their experiences particularly in relation to service delivery (good and bad) and any prejudice, discrimination, or undermining of their sense of self that they have experienced. You may choose a broad range of issues or take a particular focus. Some of the questions you may want to discuss are:

- What strategies have been developed either individually or collectively by service users or carers to counter negative experiences of prejudice, undermining of their sense of self, or discrimination? (It may be of benefit for social work students to know of positive life experiences, either currently or in the past).
- What has been their experience of social workers and where do service users and carers see potential for improved policy and practice?
- Does the literature highlight issues raised by service users and carers in the consultation?

As part of their timetable, two afternoons were provided for consultation with the user groups and these had also been agreed with the agencies involved. Students and service users could also negotiate other times outside these formally agreed slots. Members of the user groups were also invited to the student presentation, though for a range of varied reasons this was only taken up by two of the groups.

Assessment, Evaluation and Feedback

The assessment and evaluation process was built in from the beginning of the course. The group presentation provided a formative assessment on which an individual assignment could be based. A peer feedback/evaluation tool (<http://www.swap.ac.uk/learning/assessment3.asp>) was adapted and given to students early in the course with instructions that it would be used during the final session for evaluation and feedback. It was also part of a process of a 'shadow assessment' which would be used to consult with this group of students about whether they felt that graded, peer evaluation should be part of the formal assessment for students undertaking the new social work award.

Evaluation/feedback forms were also sent out to each of the agencies. Their involvement in the evaluation of the course from their perspective had been written into the formal letter confirming their participation in the project.

The student evaluation of the course, and particularly the project on service user involvement was rated highly. Students were asked to comment on a range of issues including: their learning experiences, positive and negative of consulting with the user group; the usefulness of the presentation; the practicalities of the process; and changes which they would recommend for the future. Student evaluation was generally very positive and contained thoughtful suggestions for future developments.

Students also used the peer feedback tool within their small groups. Interesting feedback was given through this process. Students were virtually unanimous that it should not be used as part of a formal assessment process. However, as an informal process for group learning and feedback it was a valuable tool. Ideas for refining the tool were also given.

Only one of the agency groups provided formal feedback through the questionnaire that was sent to them, in spite of encouragement. However, qualitative feedback was gained through discussion with co-ordinators. Again, all were very positive and each group said that they would wish to participate again next year. Comments included:

This was an extremely positive experience for Pam¹ ... Her contribution to the student presentation has given her increased confidence and self esteem. (Youth Housing Co-ordinator)

We have nothing negative to tell you about this event ... we honestly look forward to meeting with you again. (Asylum seeker community group)

This has been a really good experience. They are opening a bank account in which to deposit the money as a fund for outings. Women felt they had a lot to offer the students based on their experience and it has really helped the group continue meeting. (Co-ordinator of domestic violence support group)

Conclusions

The user-involvement project is in the early stages of development. However, the positive feedback from both service user organisations and students provides encouragement for continuing with the process as long as the resource base is maintained. It would not have been possible to approach the agencies involved without being able to offer a reasonable honorarium for their participation in facilitating student learning, and this will remain the case for future involvement. Ideas are being developed for gaining more immediate feedback and evaluation from the service users involved in the future.

It seems particularly positive to place this project in the first term of the two year masters course, so that students are meeting with service users prior to meeting with professional social workers on placement. This provides a necessary balance to their social work knowledge, with early recognition and acknowledgement of the significance of service user experiences in providing foundational knowledge for theory and practice and thus the significance of their role in the knowledge/power interface.

Nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to over-claim the role of this project in relation to service user involvement—it represents a step towards good practice, mainstreaming the involvement of service users in social work education, rather than a step towards radical transformation. Many involved in different service user led organisations may like to see a privileging of service user knowledge over other forms of knowledge in social care rather than the balancing of the knowledge base advocated here. They may also want greater control than is represented by this process where the course co-ordinator remains the person making the key decisions about the course. This may always be a limitation due to the accountability processes of the university, though moderated by the involvement of stakeholder service user organisations in the overview of the curriculum. Within their specific area of expertise, the service user groups have control over the knowledge they impart to students and have made changes to the student brief for the project in the development stages. There will be increasing opportunities to include the service user groups in the development of the course and this is a planned aspect of work in the future.

In spite of these acknowledged limitations, it was a process that opened the eyes of students not only to the value of service user knowledge and participation, but also the debates within the area. They were particularly struck by the way in which some, though not all groups reacted against the terminology of 'service user' and found this language offensive or inappropriate. They have also been confronted with the different levels of participation by service users in organisations, from those which

are self-organising to those where there is little participation in the actual running or decision making about the service. Students commented upon the enriching process of learning with service users whose task was to tell students about their experiences of having social workers, about the discrimination that they faced, and about the processes which were helpful in resisting oppression. The students' comments provide a fitting conclusion to this discussion:

It made a huge difference—made me see individuals rather than statistics. Important because it is individuals with whom we work.

It has helped to break any stereotypes we had created by an unsympathetic media.

User groups have a more powerful effect (than lectures/seminars). It's their experience and personal stories which have more effect.

We were impressed with the political motivation of the user group, as most of us have only had contact with disabled people in a 'caring' capacity.

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Note

[1] Name changed to protect anonymity.

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