

Involving people with lived experiences in role-play assessment in social work education in England: implications for practice.

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Abstract

The involvement of people with lived-experience in social work education in England is mandated by the social work regulator. Our colleagues from the 'SUCI Group – Supporting Social Work Education with Lived Experience', increasingly contribute to assessment processes in our social work programmes, as well as to other aspects of the curriculum. For some years our SUCI colleagues, as they are known, have supported the assessment process in the preparation-to-practice module delivered at our university through the medium of live role-plays; now, due to changes in delivery brought about by Covid-19, these assessments are conducted virtually as part of the summative procedures. In this article we highlight the need to implement a robust assessment to confirm students possess sufficient practice skills to progress to their initial placement. We explore how we manage this activity through a simulated role-play to ensure a safe experience for both students and our SUCI colleagues. We conclude by affirming that receiving feedback from people with lived-experience should be normalised for social workers throughout their professional development.

Introduction

The requirement for people with lived-experience to contribute to social work programmes in England is already well-established and is reinforced by the social work regulator, Social Work England (SWE) (SWE, 2019, 2021). Involvement is mandated in all aspects of social work education (SWE, 2019, 2021), including: assessment, admission, programme and practice learning development. Standard 4 (SWE, 2021) requires that social work courses are shaped by the needs and insights of people with lived-experience of social work, employers, practitioners and academics.

The participation of people with lived-experience is defined as the active involvement of people who have either previously used, or who currently use, health or social care services in education, research, or the development of services (Fox, 2020). People with lived-experience of services are able to use their expertise of diverse health issues, impairments, or experiences of care and support, to influence the development of practice and education (Hughes, 2019).

There has been a commitment to involving colleagues with lived-experience in all aspects of the social work courses from module design and delivery, through to assessment at our university since 2002 (Anghel and Ramon, 2009). For example, we involve people with lived experiences in the preparation-to-practice module taught in the first year to social work students at all levels of study. The Learning Outcomes reflect the Social Work England Standards (SWE, 2020); and the requirement that students should undertake an assessment in preparation for direct practice in a service delivery setting (SWE, 2021).

Our SUCI (Service User and Carer Involvement) colleagues are integrated into the preparation-to-practice module from the beginning by sharing their experiences of accessing services in sessions alongside lecturers. One of our SUCI colleagues delivers Equality and Diversity training to all students on the preparation-to-practice module. Critically the SUCI Coordinator is central to supporting our SUCI colleagues throughout the social work programme offered at our university, ensuring they are integrated at every stage from admissions through to teaching, learning and assessment.

The Module

The preparation-to-practice module was developed to meet 20 of the 30-day skills component required in social work courses. The preparation-to-practice module is taught at apprentice, undergraduate and post-graduate level to all students in their first year. They must successfully complete this assessment before they progress to their initial placement. The first 20 days support the development of students' core social work skills. At the end of the module, students undertake a role play with our SUCI colleagues who then provide feedback on their ability to practice safely as they transition into a placement setting. This article explains the design, implementation and assessment of our module and examines the pedagogical frameworks that relate to the involvement of lived-experience participants.

Each student is required to attend 20 skills-based University training days and to produce a written reflection of each day. The assessment consists of a role-play, a

written case study, and students' reflections which are submitted at the end of the module. The role-play examines the students' ability to

- conduct an interview,
- recognise risk and safeguarding responsibilities, and
- write an accurate case report based on a presented case scenario.

The role play assessment and case study are designed in partnership with our SUCI colleagues. In the assessment students conduct an initial interview with one of the SUCI colleagues playing the role of a service participant who has been referred for support. Following the role-play, the students write a case report and a reflection. Alongside the support of the SUCI Coordinator, our SUCI colleagues provide feedback directly to individual students on their performance focussed on three of the module learning outcomes:

- Demonstrate the ability to communicate with others, to build effective relationships and to reflect on information given.
- Demonstrate the ability to produce basic documents relevant for practice.
- Demonstrate an initial understanding of risk and safeguarding and when to seek support and guidance.

During the extraordinary period of Covid-19, our SUCI colleagues have continued with the assessments on a virtual platform. This has been critical for allowing the students to continue to be assessed in readiness for their practice placement without disrupting their studies and crucially, to support their professional development as

they transition into placement. Following a virtual preparatory session with the SUCI Coordinator, students have an opportunity to rehearse with each other in pairs.

The SUCI Group is central to the planning and implementation of the role-play assessment including

- developing case scenarios,
- helping students prepare for the role-play interview, and
- providing detailed summative feedback on the specified learning outcomes.

They play the role of the service participant in the case scenarios and provide summative feedback on the interview role-play and related case report. They comment on the students' abilities to recognise initial responsibilities for risk and safeguarding, although academic markers can choose to add to the feedback.

Discussion

We draw on knowledge and evidence to examine how we have adopted our approach to examine students' readiness to practice. The following discussion and conclusions rely on feedback from our SUCI colleagues and from students' module evaluations integrated with our experience of supporting service participants' involvement for many years (see Anghel and Ramon, 2009).

Involvement of our colleagues with lived-experience in the preparation-to-practice module and assessment

We believe it is essential to emphasise the importance of experiential knowledge in student learning and drew on evidence from service participant literature and our extensive experience of working with our SUCI colleagues when designing the module (Duffy, Das & Davidson, 2013).

The assessment process requires complex planning to ensure the effective organisation of arrangements for students and our colleagues with lived-experience in both face-to-face and virtual environments. There is little research about the experiences of involving of service participants in virtual assessment, although the integration of people with lived-experience has been central to social work assessment for many years (Duffy, Das & Davidson, 2013). The use of virtual platforms to conduct interviews that would usually be practised face-to-face presented unique challenges. For example, ensuring that our SUCI colleagues had personal access to the required technology enabling the assessment of students' body language that would normally be nuanced in face-to-face settings.

In the current virtual format, implemented in response to the Covid-19 context, students sign up in pairs for the assessment and are given 15-minute slots with a SUCI colleague playing the role of a service participant. Students are supported either side of the interview: the SUCI Coordinator meets with them virtually before and after the interview, reassuring them and providing time to debrief. They are reminded as part of their assessment to reflect on any difficulties they encountered in the interview from both their own and the SUCI colleague's perspective. This

reflection allows the student to analyse their performance and support a pass in the module. If students do not pass the assessment, there is a further opportunity to rehearse and repeat the role-play.

Lived-experience colleagues as collaborators

The involvement of people with lived-experience as assessors is not a new development (Crisp, Green Lister and Dutton, 2006); indeed, many recent studies have noted the benefits of them providing formative feedback to students in the assessment process (Skoura-Kirk et al, 2013; Hitchin, 2016; Loughran and Broderick, 2017). Hitchin (2016) identified three key factors for supporting role-play interviews. First, activities should be underpinned by contributions from well-established stakeholder groups utilising principles of co-production. Second, people with lived-experience should be able to choose which elements of teaching they want to be involved in. Finally, the demands and potential impact of the role-play on service participants' wellbeing should be central to planning processes, requiring them to be fully prepared and supported throughout their involvement with adequate opportunities to debrief.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of supporting people with lived experience when they assess students in role-play scenarios (Hitchin, 2016; Skilton, 2011; Skoura-Kirk et al, 2020). Hitchin (2016 p. 975) noted that in role-plays people with lived-experience suspend their expert-by-experience role to 'act' as recipients of social care. Moreover Duffy, Das and Davidson (2013) identify that role-play may reinforce such experience of relative powerlessness from times when they required social care support. However, after the role-play concludes in our context, our SUCI

colleagues immediately switch to the assessor role by formulating their feedback for each student. This includes assessing and fine grading each student against two of the module learning outcomes. We believe from the positive feedback from our SUCI colleagues that the dual role of actor and assessor re-asserts their skills and experience.

Moreover, originally our module used actors for the summative assessment role-play as, we can now reflect, we were perhaps overprotective in terms of any potential 'vulnerability' our SUCI colleagues might experience. Zavirsek and Videmsek (2009) recognise the resilience and capabilities of those who have experienced multiple adversities and are able to teach others. Thus, although we need to ensure our SUCI colleagues are effectively supported following involvement (Hitchin, 2016; Skilton, 2011), we need to recognise that our SUCI Group is long-standing with highly-valued skills and experience which challenge us as academics. Thus, modelling transparent communication processes directly between service participants and students in assessment processes can reinforce the power of lived-experience colleagues and their role in enhancing the quality of the social care workforce.

Consistency and fairness of assessment

Inconsistencies in the level of challenge to students have been identified in our processes as well as in other studies which use role-play with people with lived-experience as an assessment task (Skoura-Kirk, Brown and Mikelyte, 2020).

Furthermore, our SUCI colleagues may have differing expectations of students in

responding to the same situation (Hitchin, 2016). For example, to meet one of the learning outcomes, the students need to identify strengths and risks of the service participants in the role-play. This may lead to variations in students' experiences of assessment. To reduce this potential inconsistency in our model of assessment, as reported already, the case scenarios are constructed collaboratively with the SUCI Group, including discussion between them on expectations to standardise the assessment as far as possible.

Service participant feedback and life-long learning

Allen et al (2016) have commented that sometimes service participants may be reticent in giving direct negative feedback to practitioners, because they may fear a collaborative conversation can lead to receipt of a worse service because of power differentials. This can be a particular fear to people in receipt of mental health services (Allen et al, 2016) due to the statutory powers that social workers possess (Mental Health Act, 1983, amended). It is important to ensure that social work students can respond effectively to feedback given by people with lived-experience about their practice to enable them to respect the value of expertise-by-experience (Fox, 2020).

Moreover, as students move through their careers from student to qualified and senior practitioner roles, they will increasingly receive feedback from service participants (SWE, 2020); therefore, it is important for them to develop effective listening skills and to respond to feedback appropriately. Furthermore, as they acknowledge the significance of responding to criticism, this will enable them to build

respectful relationships in which they recognise the potential impact of power imbalances in the relationships they make (Fox, 2020).

The entire process of assessment reflects a commitment to lifelong learning, by consistently promoting the need to seek feedback. This fits with Assessed and Supported Year in Employment and the new SWE Continuing Professional Development framework required throughout the social work career. The findings of Skoura-Kirk, Brown and Mikelyte (2020) support our view that user-led activities and role-plays for social work students contribute to improvement of students' skills and provide a perspective that may challenge the dominance of professional narratives in social work education.

Finally, as a university, we model a best practice approach of listening to all stakeholders by creating a feedback loop between our SUCI colleagues, students, and academics. We survey each cohort of students to examine their experience of the module and assessment through the university-wide module evaluation process that allows us to access timely information on their learning experiences. Feedback from module evaluations by students indicates that they valued the opportunity to learn about the viewpoints of people with lived-experience from the inception of their social work career, normalising the experience of service participant involvement in the delivery of services. The feedback loop provides critical information about any need to adjust the process. The most recent cohort reported a positive experience with some noting the value of critical learning for their future practice. We recognise the dangers of complacency, but these results help us to recognise the best practice

modelled in this assessment. Additionally, in adherence to these values, this article has been approved by the SUCI Group as an accurate record of their involvement in skills-based assessments.

Conclusion

In the preparation-to-practice module social work students receive and acknowledge feedback from our SUCI colleagues. The module is designed to integrate with each phase of the social work student career to model how service participant involvement helps students learn about sharing power and changes the narrative of expert knowledge (Fox, 2020). Success in achieving the delivery of this module will ensure that students are safe to proceed to initial placement and that the course reflects the needs and insights of all stakeholders (SWE, 2021). This promotes respect and value of expertise-by-experience both systemically across social work education and for individual practitioners (Fox, 2020). It is intended to formally evaluate students', lecturers' and our SUCI colleagues' experiences to inform the further iteration of the module and assessment processes.

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