

‘They’ve got it!

Social work students’ understanding of service user and carer perspectives.

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Summary: This paper considers some of the complexities of involving people who use social work services in qualifying education and some of the positive aspects of doing so. The paper reviews growing involvement and the importance of training courses and support for those who get involved drawing on evaluations.

Keywords: service user and carer participation; evaluation; practice learning

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Introduction

Involving people who use services (PWUS) and carers in health and social care service design, delivery, research and education is high on the UK government's modernisation agenda (DH, 1998, 2001, 2002b, 2006; Lowes & Hulatt, 2005). PWUS and carers identify two key issues for social work training (DH, 2002a):

Understanding what the life of a carer, or person who uses services, is like; and understanding the significance of the quality of the relationship between social workers and carers and PWUS.

It is essential to allow the principles and practice of involvement to 'enter professional consciousness at the level of training' (Boylan et al., 2000, p.554) in order that students learn how to work with and learn from PWUS and carers. This manuscript details one example of how a group of final year social work undergraduates were enabled to understand what it is like to be a carer of an adult or a person who uses adult services and the importance of the quality of their relationship with users, facilitated by an induction programme for PWUS and carers called *Opportunities for Involvement*. 'They've got it!' is a phrase that was heard after these students had presented their practice learning experience – in recognition of their increased understanding.

Background

PWUS and carers have been connected with providing training for social workers since the 1980s – about the same time as the rise of consumerism and market economics in the UK (Beresford et al., 2006). More recently, the regulatory body for social care in England, the General Social Care Council, requires the design and delivery of social work education to include partnership and collaboration with PWUS and carers. Social care staff need to be equipped to respond to the needs of PWUS and carers – education is one way to achieve this (Felton & Stickley, 2004). Therefore, the general aim of collaborating and working in partnership with PWUS and carers is to provide 'a

firm basis for making training relevant and ensuring improvements in practice' (NISW, 2001, p.3; also see Repper & Breeze, 2004).

This aim is set against a background of questions about the nature of knowledge, what constitutes valid knowledge, who controls its production and whose knowledge counts – the discussion is about whose voices are heard and whose are silenced. The lived experience of PWUS and carers and (the practice wisdom of) practitioners, 'can be just as valid a way of understanding the world' (Glasby & Beresford 2006, p.281) as compared with knowledge produced by the ubiquitous systematic research review or randomized controlled trial. Yet, the way this experience is used in social work education varies. A number of authors outline the possible levels of participation using broad categories (Arnstein, 1971; Hanley et al., 2003; Beresford, 2005; Allain et al., 2006). For instance, Hanley et al.'s continuum of involvement ranges from consultation e.g. asking for views on a particular issue, through collaboration e.g. on a steering group or committee, to user control where the locus of power is with the carers and/or PWUS.

A general assumption is made in the literature that any such involvement of PWUS and carers in education, services or research results in positive benefit for those who use services, carers, students and professionals (Carr, 2004; Levin, 2004; GSCC & SCIE, 2004). Benefits to PWUS and carers can be personal e.g. making friends, being empowered and increased confidence, and practical e.g. learning new skills, having a valued role and possibly earning money (Lindlow & Morris, 2002; Simpson & House, 2003; Felton & Stickley, 2004). Professionals may be challenged in their assumption that PWUS and carers lack competence (Felton & Stickley, 2004). Students may gain an insight into the lives and experience of carers and PWUS (Felton & Stickley, 2004) and knowledge about services (Molyneux & Irvine, 2004) that can lead to improved relationships with, and more individualised assessment of, clients (Simpson & House, 2003).

However, working in partnership with PWUS and carers does not automatically guarantee the empowerment of those involved. Although, empowerment is a complex and contested concept, in overall terms, the involvement of PWUS and carers should be seen as a means of enabling people to have more control over their lives (Lindlow & Morris, 2002). Yet, the very terms often used to identify user involvement, such as 'service user' and 'carer' can be stigmatizing and excluding (Hefferman, 2006). The key issue here is 'representativeness'. Group

processes within the involvement of PWUS and carers can lead to what Lennie (2005) describes as 'political disempowerment'; where certain participants take control of particular aspects of the project and agenda. As a result some users and carers may perceive that their needs are not accommodated and leave a project. Beresford (2007) warns that unless diversity in user involvement is addressed, it may in fact reinforce rather than displace existing exclusion and marginalization. Other barriers to the representative and meaningful inclusion of PWUS and carers in education include payment (Levin, 2004; CSCI, 2007).

Involving PWUS and carers in ways that are not tokenistic requires commitment and time. Time is needed not only to build up trust and interpersonal relationships, to negotiate aims and responsibilities, but also to ensure that all possess appropriate skills for any tasks. Recent examples demonstrate the range of training on offer:

- *Stevens & Tanner (2006)*
Project to develop involvement in the teaching and learning of social work undergraduates;
- *Robson & Johns (2006)*
Project with four workshops on 'getting more involved' in social work education;
- *Cooper & Spencer-Dawe (2006)*
A training course for PWUS working as co-facilitators in the field of interprofessional education;
- *Brown & Young (2008)*
A pilot training course for PWUS and carers to become more involved in undergraduate social work education.

Capacity building is a key issue if the involvement of PWUS and carers is to be sustained to meet the growing demand from universities. Brown & Young's (2008) study provides the immediate context to understanding this manuscript. In 2005, Bournemouth University piloted a training programme designed by Skills for Care (an employer-led authority with a remit to modernise adult social care in England) to increase the numbers of PWUS and carers involved in social work education. From this group of eight carers and PWUS, the *Bournemouth University Carer and Service User Partnership Group* was formed. The lessons learned from the evaluation of this pilot, include (Brown & Young, 2008):

- the importance of allowing adequate time for such collaborative projects
- the need for clarity around issues of responsibility and accountability and the risks involved in these
- the need for the training and support of PWUS and carers
- and a sustained commitment to funding such initiatives.

Over the following two years the group began to recognise a need to expand, not just in terms of numbers but in terms of its range of expertise. This need, the above lessons and the appointment of a co-ordinator were translated into the design of an induction programme for PWUS and carers called *Opportunities for Involvement*; co-designers AW and GT began the process by mapping out the group's existing achievements and roles, and reflecting on how an expanded group would:

- build on their skills
- form an identity as a group
- gain experience and strength from each other
- understand the importance of their new role in shaping social workers.

The remainder of this manuscript relates to the first of these *Opportunities for Involvement* induction programmes held in 2007.

Opportunities for Involvement

Opportunities for Involvement has two overarching aims:

- to enable students to gain greater insight into the knowledge and values they need to become skilled practitioners; and
- to enable group members to develop their skills and knowledge to take a meaningful role in the recruitment, planning, delivery and assessment of social work programmes.

An information session was held at a local library prior to the induction programme which ran for one day on four consecutive weeks

at the university. Table 1 displays the four key aspects of the programme – social work education; bringing expertise into social work education; communication skills; and skills in action:

Table 1
Opportunities for Involvement programme content

1. *About social work education*
 - Understanding the structure of the social work degree
 - Appreciating social work from the perspective of social workers, PWUS and carers
 - Understanding the concept of 'involvement'
 - Exploring different options for involvement

2. *Bringing personal expertise into social work education*
 - Recognising how users' and carers' experience, expertise and strengths can contribute to student and staff learning
 - Understanding and using active listening and assertiveness, and engaging meaningfully with others, using techniques such as role play
 - Exploring experiences of learning and identifying personal learning needs

3. *Communication skills*
 - Working as an individual and in a group
 - Communicating in meetings
 - Interviewing skills
 - Understanding discrimination, stereotyping and labelling
 - Non-verbal communication
 - Encouraging interaction and engagement
 - Exploring a range of visual/presentation aids

4. *Skills in action*
 - Preparing for and presenting a micro (10~ minutes) teaching session
 - Reflection and feedback from micro teaching session to peers
 - Identifying further development needs
 - Programme evaluation and next steps

A total of nine individuals (three carers; six PWUS) with a diverse range of experiences, ranging in age from 20-69, attended the first

induction programme. Six were female; three were male. Their main reasons for participating in the programme were to challenge and inform social work students about PWUS and carers, and to contribute to service improvements. Programme participants were asked at the end of each week to evaluate (see Appendix 1) how far the course had fulfilled its aims and the impact of the programme. Illustrative quotes from service users and carers have been placed in italics.

How far did the course fulfil its aims?

Participant responses, over the four weeks, confirmed that nearly 90% of the aims, as stated above, had been fulfilled. Everyone stated they had a clear idea about opportunities for involvement – many agreed they now had a better understanding of the social work degree programme. The trainer (AW) identified that she did not have in-depth of knowledge of social work education; this was provided by the university tutor, indicating

how real, active partnership working is not only useful but necessary to inform and equip service users and carers for involvement.

Impact on service users and carers

Service users and carers particularly enjoyed participating, exchanging views and ideas, and learning about the social work degree. From day one, a *bond* had begun to form within the group as they learnt *new things about peoples' different and diverse situations*. One person *ended the first day looking forward to meeting everyone* the following week.

The course clearly provided some participants with personal challenges, for instance, being *put on the spot* in the role play. One participant realised it was

not always easy to get a clear perspective of where others are coming from unless you take on that particular role.

Each member seemed to overcome their fears by getting involved and having the courage to be open about their own experience:

it helped me recognise my own prejudices and showed the need to be more self-aware. Discussion around racism, discrimination and conflict was found particularly interesting.

These topics helped *open up peoples' values and opinions*. Other personal challenges included the prospect of a micro-teaching session on day four of the programme. Careful thought and preparation had gone into how to plan for this session. It was agreed that if participants had been told on day one there was an expectation to give a presentation, this could have made them overly anxious. The rationale behind leaving it until day three to talk about the presentation was to:

- allow the group to bond and feel comfortable with each other
- build confidence, practice empathy and communication skills
- enable participants to focus on the main content of the programme.

I was panicked by the thought of having to do the presentation but afterwards I was glad that I had done it. The feedback I received was very sensitive and encouraging and made it worthwhile sharing my very personal experience.

'Skills in action' also focused on interviewing, giving feedback and assessing student learning. The service user trainer (AW) noted how encouraging it was

to know that not only will the University benefit as a consequence of 'Opportunities for Involvement,' but that participants had already gained personal benefit by rising to new challenges, increased in confidence and had a sense they had something of significant value to offer.

Impact on students' learning

New group members acknowledged that working with tutors on the social work programme enabled them to develop their skills and

knowledge and take on more meaningful roles in social work education. The widening participation of PWUS and carers allowed social work programme staff to reflect on how they could more effectively make use of the group and facilitate students to gain greater insight into the knowledge and values they need to develop to become skilled practitioners. These PWUS and carers had begun to develop their knowledge and confidence to share their experiences in a wider context.

Prior to *Opportunities for Involvement* PWUS and carers had participated in interviewing prospective students but had 'learned on the job'. *Opportunities for Involvement* had given them the confidence to be equal members of the interviewing panel. Their understanding of the social work degree and their clarity of expectations in terms of the knowledge, skills and values they would expect a student social worker to attain increased their contribution to the interviewing process. Members of PWUS and carer group joined a working party to revise the interview process to focus more specifically on skills, values and aptitude for independent learning.

Students on social work placements have been required to ask for PWUS and carer feedback on their practice. In the past, students were provided with a PWUS/carer feedback form; now, students are asked to write a reflective analysis of a particular aspect of their practice with a focus on their understanding of the PWUS/carer perspective and its impact on their practice. As part of the *Opportunities for Involvement* process there has been progression from collecting feedback in a tokenistic way for the practice learning portfolio, to requiring the students to reflect on what they have learned from feedback and how that learning has informed their practice.

Another example of the impact of *Opportunities for Involvement* on student learning has been the creation of a PWUS portfolio reading team. Members read random portfolios and are asked to comment on student knowledge, skills and values, and their understanding of the PWUS and carer perspective within their portfolio. Team members have been able to feedback their comments to the Practice Assessment Panel. This process has rooted the importance of the PWUS and carer perspective in practice, and the meaningful inclusion of PWUS and carer perspective within practice learning documentation. Asking the simple question, 'has the student adequately demonstrated the PWUS/carer perspective in the portfolio?' has required students to reflect meaningfully on their communication and assessment skills, and

partnership working. This process has enabled Practice Assessment Panel readers to focus on the student's understanding of the PWUS and carer perspective – a crucial additional focus.

PWUS and carer involvement in the assessment of practice learning has been strengthened by the introduction of a student presentation at the conclusion of each practice learning placement – assessed by a PWUS or carer, practice educator and university tutor. Part of the assessment criteria is to 'demonstrate an awareness of the PWUS and carer perspective'. After assessing second and third year presentations one Opportunities for Involvement participant (PWUS) remarked that the third years *had got it!* This individual had identified the progression between second and third year students. At the point of qualification, these students had competently demonstrated their awareness of the PWUS and carer perspective in an empathic way. The value of involvement is also apparent from student feedback; the trainer notes ...

comments from students are a clear demonstration that the input is well received and has an impact on understanding and implications for practice...from a service user perspective it can be empowering; telling your story and having a sense that something positive can come from your experiences.

Discussion

There are a number of important factors that have contributed to the impact of this programme on students' practice learning. In 2006, a carer from the original user and carer steering group was appointed to co-ordinate the involvement of PWUS and carers in the undergraduate social work programme. The co-ordinator's organisational and support skills have been invaluable to both *Opportunities for Involvement* trainer (AW) and participants.

The careful preparation required by a trainer should also not be underestimated... *careful thought and preparation contributed greatly to the smooth running of the course.* Although considerable time and resource had gone into *Opportunities for Involvement* this gave the trainer *valuable experience, increased confidence and a good insight as to what preparation was needed for involvement.* Hastings (2000) asserts that training should ideally be delivered to service users by their peers, since this would

prove empowering and challenge the unequal user-professional power dynamic. Nevertheless, university tutor involvement has also been recognised by the PWUS and carer group as an essential part of the programme that enabled different perspectives to be debated.

In line with the government's agenda to develop the involvement of PWUS and carers in social work education (DH, 2006) the vision of the Bournemouth University Carer and Service User Partnership Group is to continue to:

- Run the *Opportunities for Involvement* on an annual basis
- Consider the possibility of involving 'young people'
- Develop a 'Train the Trainer' programme to enable other members of the partnership group to assist with *Opportunities for Involvement*
- Continue to recruit members to the Partnership to increase the diversity of the group and to allow for people to step down when it is timely for them to do so.

Yet, to fulfil this vision will require sufficient resource. Molyneux and Irvine (2004) suggest that time and resources need to be set aside to develop participation and maintain involvement with PWUS and carers. Current resources are barely able to meet existing demand. The group's existing focus is on adult services; there is a danger that social work students could over-identify with adults and lose the voice of the child. To add this voice to the PWUS and carer group, and involve young people within *Opportunities for Involvement* and the wider education of social workers will require further sustainable funding. This balance is important – increased involvement from young people should ensure that the voice of the child continues to be explicitly heard in the teaching of 'safeguarding'; and ensure that degree courses prepare social workers for the full realities of working with children and families who may have complex needs (Laming, 2009).

The *Opportunities for Involvement* programme and increased participation by PWUS and carers in a wider social work educational context has led to greater reflection on the impact of PWUS and carers on student practice. Seeking feedback and refocusing on what has been learned via on the perspective of PWUS and carers' has made a difference to the quality of the evidence presented by students in their practice portfolios. The challenge now is to move further along Hanley et al's (2003) continuum towards a fuller collaboration of PWUS and carers in student learning and assessment in agency settings.

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Appendix 1

Opportunities for involvement: Evaluation form

Opportunities for involvement – evaluation form

Please complete this form at the end of each week, thank you.

1. What have you enjoyed about today?
2. Has the content of the day fulfilled the aims as set out at the beginning
3. For the following aspects of communication please circle the number that most closely represents how you feel about the day (1=boring; 6 = stimulating):

Stimulation
Relevancy
Clarity
Participation

Any further comments:

4. Please rate (1=very poor; 6= excellent) your score on the following aspects of programme content:

Range of activity
Quality of handouts
Content and readability of presentation materials

Any further comments:

5. Please rate (1=not effective; 6=very effective) the trainer on the following:

Knowledge of subject
Organisation of session
Preparation
Style/delivery

6. Any further comments and/or suggestions as to how any aspect of the days could have been better:

Please return this for to AW. Thank you for your time.