

An evaluation of student social workers' experience of observational learning

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Summary: The University of the West of Scotland utilises a model of Observational Practice Learning in the first two years of the BA (Hons) Social Work Programme. The theoretical framework used in developing this model of learning was that of reflective and transformative learning. This paper outlines our evaluation of these observational experiences in order to demonstrate how it aids students in merging practical and theoretical learning and examine whether it assists students in the development of the reflective skills required for assessed practice learning. Using a qualitative approach, we set out to evaluate the students' perceptions and experiences of observational learning.

The evaluation has shown that Observational Practice Learning enables students to make links between teaching and practice, with mentors, service users and tutors playing a pivotal role in developing students' self awareness and prompting reflective thinking. Such experiences appear to have assisted in preparing students more effectively for their assessed practice learning opportunities later in the degree programme.

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Introduction

The 21st Century Review of Social Work, *Changing Lives* (Scottish Executive, 2006), set out a vision for improving outcomes for those requiring services from social work agencies. There was a government push for employers to develop practitioners with the ability to critically analyse. Social work educators were given messages to build workforce capacity, as it was clear that 'more of the same won't work' (Scottish Executive, 2005). By improving standards in social work education, programmes would produce competent reflexive professionals. *Changing Lives* (2006) called for educators to move social work students from being passive learners to active ones, taking more responsibility for their learning and professional development. Consequently, most Social Work Programmes sought to connect students to a process of critical reflection early on. This is an essential skill which takes students the duration of their programme to attain, and establishing these foundational habits aids the development of critical thinking.

Learning is a complex process and educators draw on a variety of adult learning theories to provide a range of tools to engage students in acquiring professional skills. Practice learning is one of the learning tools providing a means for students to integrate teaching and attain core skills. The practice experiences enable integration between doing and learning and develop competence. Given that a minimum of '160 days must be spent in supervised direct practice' (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.1), our programme at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) contains four points of practice learning over four years. However, the first two years includes thirty days non-assessed observational practice learning. UWS created these periods of observational learning as students are required to be tested to establish that they are safe practitioners *prior* to undertaking assessed practice. We structured the experience in such a way as to prepare students for assessed practice. By involving students in two shorter periods of observational learning, we ensure they have considerable contact with service users, practitioners and a variety of service provisions. This preparation includes developing 'a greater understanding of the experience of service users and the role of social workers' (Scottish Executive, 2003, p.15) and begins to blur 'the line between so called 'classroom learning' and 'learning in practice' (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.1). Consequently formative teaching can begin to be more applied.

Our model of observational learning thus ensures that students are safe and ready to carry out assessed practice and assists in developing a competent and confident learner. Observational learning does not take place in isolation to the academic programme and is purposely integrated into first and second year modules *and* connected to the module assignments. Accordingly, the observational aspects of the programme, together with assessed practice learning, aim to move students from active participants to critical reflective practitioners by highlighting connections between experiences and teaching.

This paper explains our model of observational learning and the theory behind it as it appears to be significant in the learning and transformational development of students. Through an evaluation of student feedback we seek to demonstrate how interactive observational experiences enable students to gain insight into the role ahead of them. In particular, we examine the students' perceptions of observational learning and what works by highlighting areas that are meaningful for them. Finally we present an overview of the positive aspects of our model and what developments are needed to further integrate teaching and learning and encourage reflective thinking.

Why observational learning: The theoretical background

To ensure observational experiences were meaningful and prompted development of critical reflection, a range of adult learning theories were considered and incorporated into the design of our model. For example, the literature on student learning (see Ramsden, 1992; Arreglado et al, 1996; Shardlow, 2005; and Doel, 2010) suggests skills and knowledge can increase when students are involved in self directed, active learning which provides reflective feedback during an activity. Hence, good models of observational learning would need to build in opportunities for reflection for example with mentors, tutors, service users and other students.

A study of practice learning in 1981 by Syson and Baginsky found that most experiences were not integrated into the academic components of programmes and that placements needed to be designed to bring out the students' skills and knowledge. They claimed it was by chance that

social work placements were co-ordinated to integrate knowledge and skills, maintaining that placements were not tailored to the needs of students on the course but rather appeared to be ad hoc. A further study of outcomes in social work education by Burgess and Carpenter (2008) showed this problem still continues today. Such findings prompted programmes to plan and consider learning outcomes in relation to practical and experiential learning.

To aid the integration of knowledge and learning, programmes drew on the theories of Kolb (1984) and Biggs (1999). Kolb (1984) identified that learning through observing, watching and doing was part of the fundamental process of becoming a reflective thinker. Biggs' theory of constructive alignment argues that students must construct meaning from what they learn, while the teacher aligns planned learning activities with outcomes. Consequently, to measure learning there must be an outcome which can be seen. Kolb (1984) and Biggs (1999) suggest that students learn through participation in direct experiences providing they can be encouraged to reflect on them. This leads to a deeper learning which in turn leads to actions that demonstrate their learning.

Reflective practice is a central characteristic of social work training as students are required to reflect on what they are doing and why, and to link theory to practice. In line with this, Schön (1983) proposes the use of reflexive analysis to confront practice dilemmas and learn new ways of tackling them. For students to integrate key concepts and acquire skills they need to be able to link teaching to practice experiences and have the space to observe, reflect and try out learning in a safe environment. Thus observational learning involves a process of providing opportunities for self-examination and a catalyst for reflection and transformative learning.

Transformational learning

The theory of transformational learning provides a valuable insight into how learners construct the meaning of their experiences into deeper learning. Mezirow's (1981, 1990, 1991, 1997, 2000) work on transformational learning examined the longitudinal transformation that takes place in learners. He emphasizes that learning is rooted in the way individuals communicate as this prompts a shift in the

person's view of the world and increased insight into the self. He claims that transformation is a process and does not happen by experience alone. Rather, it needs the involvement of the educator in focusing and challenging the learner's experiences. A partnership between learner and educator must exist as the support of the educator is a key component in the process. Another influential factor in the student's professional development is the opportunity for ongoing discussion with the educator. Consequently, he claims the process of evoking a transformation requires three key characteristics: the centrality of the experience; critical reflection; and rational discourse.

Learners must then *engage* in their experiences and have opportunity for a discussion which enables them to change their attitudes and perceptions. Mezirow identified directed discussions as the catalyst for transformation as these prompt students to explore the depth and meaning of their views. If this happens in a controlled but empowering way then it is more likely that students can be prompted into a self awareness which ensures a meaningful start for critical reflection.

Our model of observational learning

To assist students in transferring knowledge from the classroom to the workplace our model of observational learning was designed with these foregoing characteristics in mind. In our programme, observational learning is taken to mean short interactive, non-assessed experiences which involve students in day-to-day interaction with service users in diverse organisations. To facilitate observational learning the curriculum is designed so that learning activities and assessments are aligned with the learning outcomes. We designed a model which linked students to specific experiences with services users. For the majority of students these experiences would be diametrically different from their current life experiences and frames of reference. Each student is allocated a Mentor within the placement agency who guides the student into specific experiences, seeking out those that are connected to the student's stage of development, allowing them to shadow workloads. Therefore Mentors have a significant role in connecting the experiences for the students and aiding the development of self-awareness. They guide the student (through ongoing dialogue) to examine their values

and frames of reference with a view to prompting students to reflect on what they have understood and experienced. Equally, the module assignments attached to observational learning produce an overview of the students' experiences while prompting them into both self awareness and reflection which enables the students to experience the type of transformative learning referred to by Mezirow (1981, 1990). Hence, observational learning is structured in such a way to assist students in gaining insight into the helping process, as well as insight into self. A key factor in the whole process is the relationship the student has with their mentor and the interactive dialogue that takes place.

Placements are found by the Practice Learning Development Officer at the University and are predominantly in the social care sector, in either day care or group care settings involving statutory and voluntary agencies. Mentors are offered training and guidance in the role and supported by the Development Officer throughout the experience. Partnership working between the Development Officer and agencies is essential to link learning on the programme with observational experiences. Clear guidelines regarding what the student can and cannot be involved in are given at briefings with mentors and students. Experiences are not ad hoc and mentor training is designed to assist them to integrate experiences with teaching and develop students' skills and knowledge as appropriate to their stage of training.

The process begins in year one when students are involved in ten days of observational learning, followed by twenty more days in year two, this time always in a group care setting. Staff on the programme work with agencies to ensure students have specified experiences that will connect to the teaching level they are at. Our model allows the student to be interactive as they follow service users and mentors through a variety of daily experiences. It was constructed to enable students to become familiar with the role of the social worker and to enable learning through interactions with service users. As mentors and service users are involved in the planning of these experiences this ensures a stronger connection between what is taught in class and what the student experiences in observational settings. Ultimately, academic assignments and feedback from agency mentors and service users provides UWS with a measure of the student's fitness to progress to assessed practice.

Although not assessed, students use observational learning to gather information for their assignments. For example, in year one,

the assignments ask students to examine their understanding of social work and why individuals require services. In year two they explore differences between individual and group care needs and the conflicts surrounding service provision. In gathering information for assignments students are expected to discuss the issues with service users, mentors and staff and this allows them to begin to integrate practice knowledge and learning. By offering a structured environment for students where mentors are central in ensuring interactive discussion the observational experiences are more likely to prompt students into self-awareness which prepares them for future assessed practice. At its most basic, students have the space to ask questions, to observe services in action and reflect without the same responsibilities that come with being assessed later on.

Our model is primarily based on theories of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1981, 1990, 1991, 1997, 2000) and reflective learning (Schön, 1983, 1987). In designing these experiences we also referred to Biggs' (1999) constructive alignment to ensure that students could construct meaning from what they did and these were connected to learning outcomes. In particular, we have structured observational learning to provide encounters with individuals who use services in a wide variety of situations and the student is offered significant stimulus for reflection. Indeed, early module feedback suggested observational learning was significant in developing reflective thinking. When reviewing the course evaluation material (which included feedback from mentors, service users and students) it seemed observational experiences could provide a number of advantages to our students especially assisting them in the reflective process which prompts the beginning of transformative learning. However, although a wealth of information was gathered from this material, it did not provide us with sufficient specific information regarding the students' experiences of observational learning.

Consequently, we set out to evaluate the place of observational learning more systematically with a view to exploring the following,

- The students' experience and perceptions of observational learning, and their attitudes towards it.
- Whether it prepared students for assessed learning.
- The modifications and changes needed to the model, if any.

Methodology

Given the messages in the 21st Century Review (2006), the authors set out to appraise the meaning of observational learning from the students' perspective, seeking feedback which would enable us to identify and develop aspects of the model which were working well and those which required modification.

A qualitative approach was chosen, primarily because the purpose of the evaluation was to *explore* the experiences of observational learning from the students' perspective. By reviewing the initial module feedback from both students and mentors and exploring the assignments attached to observational learning, the writers confined the evaluation to capturing the experiences of the students. As module feedback provided some information about the *process* of observational learning (as well as outcomes) we decided to continue with this method to aid us in a more in depth evaluation of the process (Robson, 2000). Module feedback may provide information about the effectiveness of our design however, we also wanted to analyse what was happening within observational learning and capture the complexities of what was going on. Developing a more specific questionnaire would allow us to cross reference the information gleaned from the module feedback and module assignment with the data generated by the evaluation questionnaire. Thus questionnaires were designed and employed to encapsulate these experiences and gather the students' views. Students could volunteer to participate and therefore we did not select out any specific individual or group of individuals. We chose this method to obtain specific information swiftly and to enable us to explore the connections to the developing self awareness within the students. On this occasion questionnaires allowed the researchers 'greater coverage because participants (could) be approached more easily' and less intrusively (Whittaker, 2009, p.73). It was felt that the use of questionnaires at this point would also prevent bias that can come from individual interviews as students can tell researchers what they believe they want to hear, whereas questionnaires can ask for information in a stable manner with no interviewer variability (Sarantakos, 2005; Whittaker, 2009). They also offered an inexpensive and less time consuming way of obtaining the data we needed, an unfortunate but realistic factor which must be considered when undertaking any evaluation (Robson, 2000).

The final questionnaire was designed using a pilot questionnaire with the previous year three students. This allowed us to gain immediate feedback about draft areas and develop questions that would elicit the required information. This process also helped us to ensure questions were methodical and ethical and that care was taken not to introduce any bias regarding our own views of observational learning (Sarantakos, 2005). Questions fell into four sections: the context of observational learning; the experience itself; the students' perceptions of learning; and outcomes. We ensured they followed a logical funnel format allowing for transition and flow between questions. We used some open primary questions with few closed questions, in order to be able to examine the students' experiences and perceptions of observational learning and link these with the purpose of the evaluation (Robson, 2000; Sarantakos, 2005).

The questionnaire was sent out by e-mail to all seventy five students. A covering letter explaining the purpose of the evaluation was included and we used a flexible timescale thereby allowing students to complete it anonymously when they wished. The covering letter influences the response rate and care was taken to ensure it introduced and clearly presented the purpose of our evaluation and how the information would be used. We wanted the questionnaire to be encouraging and concise and inspire participants to complete it (Whittaker, 2009). This would ensure that it would be easy to complete and would therefore go some way to offsetting the high non-response rate typical of this method (Sarantakos, 2005).

A total of thirty four percent of students responded, a return rate we were not able to anticipate prior to testing. The researchers had given serious attention in the planning stage to the most common reasons for non return of questionnaires (see Robson, 2000; Sarantakos, 2005). However, we learned too late that students felt they had already shared their thoughts about observational learning via the module feedback and there are limitations on how long 'participants are willing to spend on completing questionnaires' (Whittaker, 2009, p.73). Although the response rate was smaller than hoped for, our findings are nevertheless interesting and valid insofar as they highlight themes and issues arising out of the observational learning experience. Some would argue that the higher the response rate the more likely the results are representative of the target group. However, Larry (1972, p.323) notes that when surveys are made of

homogeneous populations (persons having some strong group similarity and identity) concerning their attitudes, opinions and perspectives, toward issues concerning the group, then significant response-rate bias is probably unlikely.

Here, what is argued to be more important for validity is the presence of non-response bias. So, if non responders are similar to responders in every way the responses given will not be unrepresentative of the group studied. Thus, Cummings et al (2001, p.1348) argue that 'even questionnaires with low response rates for which no systematic differences between responders and non respondent exist could be considered valid'. In addition to the points made by Cummings et al (2001) and Larry (1972) it is important to note that we also had access to other sources of data, the module feedback in particular, which provided more information about the perceptions of this student group and meant data could be triangulated.

In terms of analysis, the data obtained from the evaluation questionnaires was split by years. Each set was examined and responses were coded for themes. The codes were organised into related categories to determine which themes were representative of those who had responded. A sample of the module feedback was also collated to identify and examine the themes arising and to cross reference the module feedback with the evaluation data. Given the low return rate from the evaluation questionnaire, the module feedback was used as an independent cross referencing source because it included discrete feedback from students, mentors and service users in a prescribed format. This feedback format had a much higher return rate (ninety eight percent) as it is a compulsory aspect of the module. Although the module feedback had been used to examine the effectiveness of observational learning and not the specific perceptions and experiences of students, nevertheless it still provided important information in respect of these areas. Thus there was a large amount of summative information available which could serve to confirm or otherwise the attitudes and perceptions found in our evaluation questionnaire. The module feedback was also specifically designed to include the views of mentors and service users and this could complement and aid the triangulation of the evaluation questionnaires (Robson, 2000) Although the module questionnaires were not used to measure changes in perceptions, they provided some information regarding the students' overall experiences and attitudes

towards observational learning and therefore enabled us to link responses into the themes emerging from the evaluation questionnaires.

The experience of observational learning

In analysing students' perspectives we acknowledged we could not examine any specific transformation, only their experience. Therefore, we specifically set out to examine the perceptions of students and the part played by what Mezirow (1981, 1990, 1991, 1997, 2000) describes as the learning tools, that is the mentors, service users, tutors and course work. We were particularly interested in the extent to which opportunities for discussion within the observational experiences worked to provide the catalyst needed for reflection. In relation to the data generated by the evaluation, it became apparent to the authors that the emerging themes related to aspects of Mezirow's theory of transformational learning. Mezirow's theory claims learners need the opportunity to have a focused discussion as rational discourse is required to prompt critical reflection and this, in turn, enables the learner to reform their views and perspectives which can lead to transformation. Mezirow claims learners will pass through different stages in order to change their perspectives and achieve the transformation and desired learning aimed for by the educator. We found clear evidence to support this. What follows then is a summary of key themes arising out of the evaluation. This demonstrates connections between the transformational learning characteristics he identified and our model of observational learning.

Disorientation dilemmas

Disorientation dilemmas occur when people have experiences that do not fit their current explanations and they cannot resolve without changing their views of the world. Mezirow (1981,1990,1991,1997,2000) maintains that the experience provides a catalyst for perspective transformation. All of the first year respondents made links to some kind of disorientation dilemma. One year one respondent noted

I saw some real things. ...the discrimination, inequality and poverty experienced

by vulnerable individuals was evident in an almost daily level which confirmed the need to contextualise and reflect on how the concept of the PCS model works. I could not have understood this from a text book, as I felt it too.

For a time some reported that they were not always sure what they were learning and many claimed that the experiences moved them out of their 'comfort zone', particularly first year students who began the course with a specific understanding of social work and what social workers did. Furthermore, many year one students felt that reading from books developed their thinking but that observational experiences encouraged reflection; 'having to face situations' in a live way prompted a further development of their thinking.

For many in year two the experience prompted them to review their current perceptions and views. One year two student illustrated this by stating that:

I feel I have a better understanding of discrimination, as I didn't have an insight into how much and why discrimination occurs for disadvantaged groups. This opportunity has given me a better understanding of how much injustice and inhumane treatment of people who are already disadvantaged face.

All of the respondents claimed that they enjoyed the direct contact with staff and service users as they could discuss aspects of practice with them immediately and get answers to questions they were unsure about or could not understand. One year 1 student summed this up as follows:

Service users told it like it was, but it felt like a two way type of learning they helped shape our thinking and our actions and we were allowed to be involved in a way that mattered to them, this meant I gained a sense of the realities and the struggles of their day- to- day life that will stay with me.

For the majority the observational experiences changed their views allowing them access to ideas they had not considered in depth before. All students commented on how the experiences made them look at themselves in a way they had not done previously. This was particularly significant for first year students, one of whom wrote:

I realised life experience is crucial within social work as people are not textbooks,

emotions, feelings and human beings are involved and only real hands on experience will prepare you for working with.

Change in meaning or perspective

Change in meaning or perspective from the individual's usual frame of reference is an indication that the learner has begun to think differently. In year one, all but two students reported that being able to observe social care workers in 'live situations with service users' helped them develop a connection to many of the issues they had read about in the classroom setting but not yet experienced or understood in a working context. One first year respondent outlined how being able to observe service users and workers in action provided the opportunity for reflection stating:

Observational learning gave me opportunity to reflect on my values and helped me explore strengths and weaknesses I have It provides another dimension of the actual reality of information we had learned in class.

The majority of students identified that certain aspects of becoming a social worker became more tangible through having the opportunity to see both social workers in action and aspects of the role being modelled. This meant that core social work values and principles were amongst the key things that became more contextualised and presented a different meaning once they were out in observational learning. One year two student wrote:

Observational learning made me realise I did have strong views on people and their issues and I wasn't aware of it It is important to experience practice learning as well as the learning at the University and balance that out. You are using people skills to engage with people and build working relationships and although the text books lay down theories, they do not tell you how to work as a social worker or how you are perceived by others.

The majority of respondents indicated it was the observational experiences as a whole, but specifically the interaction with service users which enabled them to rethink existing values and perspectives.

A revised frame of reference

A revised frame of reference happens when individuals become more aware that their current one is at odds with the experiences they are having and there is a growing awareness that their perspective has undergone a process of change. Many year one students claimed that their thinking had shifted and one first year respondent noted:

I had never worked with mental health before the cooperation from the service users was very influential in aiding my learning. ... I would never have known this service existed without the aid of observational learning... I saw the challenges service users faced in relation to poverty, I knew some of this existed but I had never experienced it first hand and this changed me.

However a shift in perspective was more likely to be identified by second year students and they seemed more open to the feedback they received from service users. One year two student identified the significant role played by service users in observational learning as follows:

I learned from being able to talk with service users, it was invaluable. Several women in the group told us that they were the real teachers and we should remember this when we were out there doing the job. It is so difficult to put into words, but they really were and what they taught us about just being with people is something I will not forget.

This reflects Mezirow's claim that feedback is significant in prompting a transformation in the learner and for many of the year two students they welcomed this as they felt it helped prepare them for their assessed practice. One second year student confirmed this by writing:

The feedback from mentors and service users means you learn from your mistakes, actions and can actually acknowledge what you are doing well ... it's about gaining confidence, experience and knowledge first hand.

This meant that observational learning was not always a comfortable process but whilst year two students were more likely to identify aspects that made them feel uncomfortable they were also more likely to use it as a way of re-examining themselves in order to develop as people and practitioners. A year two student explained,

Everyone is unique and problems affect people differently, therefore you need to work with service users to understand this. The service users enhanced my learning...they spoke about their problems which at times was difficult for me but they allowed me to understand obstacles this service user group faced.

Another year two student noted that they had become more self aware:

The observational placements were a safe place to learn about your self...and to work on your feedback from your mentor' I knew certain things (about me) had to change as it had been pointed out before in previous observational learning.

Critical reflection and reframing

Critical reflection and reframing of narrow assumptions involves not just looking back but examining assumptions made in the experience and critiquing them. Here the majority of students reported being able to reframe their thinking in relation to the helping relationship, power and oppression. This was again more likely in year two and one second year student captured it particularly well:

I have gained some substantial knowledge in a very complex system (asylum and immigration) and feel I have developed in terms of challenging poor practice, racism and discrimination. I feel that I would not have gained this experience through text books and teaching. I also believe that I have learned more about policies, acts and procedures that are applied in everyday life, which I would not have otherwise learned from classroom teaching.

Almost all of the students felt observational learning helped them make better links between teaching and practice by providing a different perspective on the teaching. Most felt experiences enabled them to integrate teaching in relation to poverty and disadvantage. Many referred to the benefits of the 'live context' and 'seeing the reality of what they were being taught' and that these experiences allowed them to review their initial thoughts about issues like poverty. One first year student explained what they had gained from service user involvement:

while we can listen and take in the teaching and complete the assignments, I feel observational learning has benefited me in seeing and experiencing the real challenges service users have like living in poverty...I don't think I would have managed this by being always in a class.

However, it was more likely that when students were in second year they identified the significance of learning from service users. One wrote:

Service users reinforced the fact that regardless of the amount of class based learning and academic ability we have, social work is an applied activity where we are experiencing the lived realities of people and highlighted the importance of communication skills and values. The service users were so welcoming and supportive, inviting me to meetings etc and genuinely wanted to help me. They reinforced issues such as having non-discriminatory attitudes and respect for each other. They taught me much about life (in this setting) which I was so grateful for.

Observational learning in both years allowed students to explore communication skills and gain insight into self awareness more fully. One first year student wrote:

As a young learner, I feel although the text books provide you with information, the majority of learning is done by witnessing first hand experiences and seeing for yourself what actually takes place.... Observational learning taught me things and allowed me to witness aspects that text books could not provide Particularly in relation to feelings and the care and service people receive.

Another first year claimed:

I learned about the importance of non verbal communication like smiling and eye contact as service users reminded us basic manners are very important to them, this helped me to finally come to terms with this thing called unconditional positive regard.

At times students reported needing support to help unpick aspects of practice that they did not understand and the observational experiences provided that. A year two student wrote:

at times when people were upset I felt as if I had no skills and I didn't know what to do. My mentor kept saying it's ok to be silent and do nothing and then I saw how to do that and how to use your non verbal body language.

Discussion

As Doel (2010, p.2) notes 'Social work students come to their courses via many different routes and in varied circumstances' and this is likely to influence their journey in relation to learning in practice and acquiring the skills of critical reflection. The feedback from the evaluation strongly suggested that students value observational experiences as they provide opportunities to see aspects of the social work role being modeled. They also provide a non threatening environment where students can test out their skills and gain feedback about themselves and their readiness to commence their assessed practice. For the majority of students observational learning provides opportunities to make assessed practice more of a level playing field given the variety of backgrounds students come from. Students indicated these experiences were an invaluable source of learning in so far as they allowed them to test out aspects of the teaching and begin to develop skills before being under assessment. This allowed them to make mistakes and to learn from them in a way which was safe for both student and service user.

Data from our evaluation suggests structured observational learning can provide an important connection with aspects of teaching and provoke changes in the student's reflective abilities by helping them to integrate the teaching with practice. Observational learning provides opportunities for students to begin to try out their understanding of social work before fully buying into the career and can prevent them from putting time into a course that they may discover is not for them. Through being involved in the work of the agency, students gain a stronger connection with the role and a clearer sense of the professional values and ethics at the core of social work. For many students this is a completely new experience and offers up a way of viewing the world that they have not considered before. The experience gives learners opportunities to ask questions about what is going on as well as gaining immediate feedback (from mentors and service users) which they can use to produce a change within themselves. These experiences help students to consider and make sense of the helping process, professional relationships and the sets of circumstances which affect service users. Academic assignments focus students by examining their reflections in specific areas and testing their learning. However, it was the contact with service users that students highlighted as essential for processing and integrating

teaching and with establishing a sense of professional identity which cannot take place in the class room.

Some feedback highlighted areas for development including the provision of 'support to work through feelings and beliefs, during and after' the placement as observational experiences are not always comfortable ones. This meant students welcomed ongoing discussion with their mentors and personal tutors but that many wanted further contact with a social worker. In year two the group care settings caused most discomfort as many students did not view this as relevant to learning about social work. The data suggested students needed help to make the connection between social care and social work and the role and task. We have since drawn on this evaluation feedback to make amendments to the model with a view to ensuring that all students are linked with a statutory social worker. In response to the issue of linking social care and social work we focused the placements more toward how social work meets group needs in order to contextualise learning and make increased and clearer connections between social care and social work.

Reflecting on the low return rate of the questionnaire and how we might facilitate the ongoing evaluation of our model we noted that the timing of the observational placements meant questionnaires had to be sent out just as students were finishing for the summer. In addition, students had already provided module feedback which focused on similar areas and students perceived this as a repeat exercise. These factors led the researchers to reconsider their evaluation tools and conclude that the relevant questions could be incorporated into the existing module feedback form in the future. This would ensure a higher return rate and that the data generated would perhaps be even more representative of the student cohort.

Conclusion

Given the numerous child protection inquiries which haunt our profession, the need for critical reflection has become a survival mechanism. Consequently, critical reflective practice is a core requirement for practitioners and the main driver of social work reviews and government policy. This means educators must produce

social workers with these skills clearly in place. Students learn these skills through a blend of academic and practical experiences. To merge practice opportunities with integrated learning, experiences must be focused, planned and adapted to the learner's needs and learning outcomes.

We developed observational placements to ensure that learning is directed and experiences planned and integrated to provide information about students' fitness to practice. In addition, experiences are designed to connect learning to module outcomes and provide opportunities for immediate feedback which are used to measure professional development. Indeed the evaluation suggests that our observational model has the essential characteristics outlined by Mezirow (1981,1990) and student feedback has enabled us to change aspects over time to make the model even more effective.

Our findings suggest learning is a journey of critical reflection and self examination and one which is not always comfortable. Observational learning alone does not produce a complete transformation of the student, but allows them to be on '*the edge*' of a process which prompts self awareness and analytical thinking (Mezirow, 2000). The evaluation process itself has offered us valuable insight into the effectiveness of what we offer students and created opportunities for further development. In this evaluation we did not examine whether these observational experiences have altered service user outcomes, however given the *Changing Lives* agenda that may need to be the focus of a future evaluation.

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