

# You talkin' to me?

## Direct Observations: a complex process made easier by effective communication

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**Abstract:** This article reflects a piece of research conducted with final year social work students and practice teachers within one health and social care trust in Northern Ireland. The work focused on the assessment of students via direct observations and aimed to capture the views, perceptions and experiences of students and practice teachers within this process.

The findings highlighted the complexity of the direct observation process and the need for effective communication as a central theme. One finding examined the issue of intervention and participation by a practice teacher within an observation. The outcome challenges current thinking as there was a high level of support for the use of professional discretion to intervene by practice teachers during an observation. The key components of preparation, agreeing goals, frameworks used and practice teacher intervention were dominated by the need for effective communication.

**Keywords:** assessment; observation; practice learning; social work education and training; student social worker

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## **Introduction and context**

The primary tasks of a practice teacher are to assess, support and promote the professional development of social work students during their practice learning opportunities (PLOs). An integral part of this process is the direct observation of students in actual practice with service users or carers.

The observation element of the social work student assessment process was formally included by The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) with the advent of the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) following the publication of Paper 30 (CCETSW 1991). A United Kingdom review of the Diploma in Social Work in 1998 by J M Consulting LTD (CCETSW 1999) was instrumental in influencing and developing the current degree in social work and retained the observation requirement. The basic structure and assessment elements associated with the observation process have changed little since their inception. Currently the Preparation for Practice module in academic teaching within the social work degree does not cover the area of direct observations. This is being reviewed at present and it is unclear if observation material will be incorporated into the teaching. The practical skills element of Preparation for Practice would be a logical choice for incorporating this type of learning into practice scenarios.

Practice learning standards were introduced by The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC, 2009). These emphasise accountability, equity and transparency within the practice learning opportunity assessment process. Developments within the Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP) demand greater quality assurance and the decision to pass or fail a student and the associated assessment should be open to scrutiny (NISCC, 2009).

Exploratory work and anecdotal evidence within the author's work environment suggested disparity exists within practice teachers approaches to the realm of direct observations as discussed by Humphrey (2007). The current regional guidelines (NIDSWP(b), 2009) specify that there should be a minimum of three direct observations of practice, but are limited to covering developmental assessment, the range of work observed and the content of the observation report. The guidelines lack clarity in relation to the specifics of actual practice and consequently practice can be variable. Issues such as intervention, preparation, choice of observation and the format of the assessed environment are 'left to interpretation as to how it should be carried out' (Barraclough, 1998, p. 24).

The direct observation of social work students has received little research

and attention with the notable exceptions of Le Riche and Tanner (1996, 1998 & 2000), Humphrey (2007) and Kemp (2001). The University of York has also been instrumental in developing a 'Collaborative' model (Koprowska et al., 1999) of direct observation, but there has been a lack of focus on some of the specifics of the student and practice teacher relationship within the observation process.

The assessment process associated with direct observations assumes greater significance when one considers it may be the only time that an off site practice teacher experiences a student's actual practice. Current developments within the Degree in Social Work require level 2 students to complete a 'Reflection on Practice' Assignment linked to direct observations. 'Tuning-in' and 'evaluations' from two of the three formally assessed observations are selected and included as appendices. Students critically reflect on their practice with reference to the material in the appendices. This work is academically marked so clarity on the specifics of the observation process is an important factor for students.

Within the literature there is a clear distinction between practice teacher intervention and participation. Humphrey's (2007, p. 727) differentiates these two issues by categorising intervention as 'seeking to alter a situation which is going awry.' Participation is viewed as 'acknowledging ones presence as a human being in the situation' (Humphrey 2007, p. 729). For the purposes of this research intervention and participation were deemed to be a single entity. They relate to any instance where a practice teacher involved themselves in an observation.

## **Messages from the literature**

Within health and social care trusts the duty of care applies equally to service users and students and quality assurance is enhanced by adherence to Practice Learning Standards (NISCC, 2009). A review of the literature uncovered limitations to this process as highlighted by The Practice Learning Manual (NIDSWPa, 2009), which sets out what practice teachers have to do, but not how to do it.

Le Riche and Tanner (1996, 1998 & 2000) describe different approaches to the observation assessment process. Three main models are specified; the scientific approach, the narrative model and the equality model. The equality model utilises strands from the scientific and narrative models with shared

ownership between the student and practice teacher. Le Riche and Tanner conclude that the equality model is preferable to the others as it addresses issues of power and emphasises the need for observers to critically reflect on *their* abilities. This resonates with recent developments that the assessment process associated with social work students should be open to challenge, and power is a crucial aspect of this process.

Humphrey (2007) describes how for practice teachers the direct observation of students cannot be exclusively pure observation or a participative encounter. She offers a model (Humphrey, 2007, p. 728) to explain this phenomenon which ranges from 'malaise' (just being no-one) to 'co-working' or acting as a practitioner. In between these extremes there are 'legitimate participation' (human being) and 'legitimate intervention' (protector of service users).

Additionally Humphrey cites 'non legitimate participation' (teacher) and 'non-legitimate intervention' (rescuer of students) within the model. Humphrey strongly advises that the intervention element is limited to 'crisis' situations, and does not provide guidance on how other scenarios should be conducted. Similarly she does not advocate participation unless its purpose is to acknowledge 'one's presence as a human being in the situation.' (Humphrey, 2007, p. 729). Therefore the overall message is that intervention and participation should be discouraged except in cases of risk or 'Hello, I'm only here to observe the student' (Humphrey, 2007, p. 729).

Kemp (2001p. 531) discusses the potential for the practice teacher to experience 'role conflict' within observations due to 'combining the role of researcher with that of professional worker.' This raises the issue of practice teacher intervention and participation within observations which continues to be a 'grey' area within practice.

Kemp identifies compatible practice methods including a flexible approach to the observation technique depending on the circumstances of the observation. Le Riche and Tanner (2000, p. 114) also make the point that observations need to be 'flexible enough to form part of a range of learning resources.' There are clearly limitations to this proposal, particularly around the area of a practice teacher acting as a role model. Kemp neatly encapsulates this sentiment when she highlights that CCETSW viewed observations purely in terms of assessing practice learning.

According to Heron et al. (2010), student surveys in the UK have demonstrated high levels of student dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback practices. The area of practice methods employed by practice

teachers in direct observations requires further research, debate and discussion. This situation is not unique to Northern Ireland as highlighted by research conducted in New Zealand. Maidment (2000) found that students reported that methods that would enable the direct observation of their practice were amongst the least used in practice PLOs. This situation is potentially problematic as demonstrated by related research from New Zealand by Hay and O'Donoghue (2009). These authors found that variation in PLO education curriculum, particularly within assessment, created confusion.

The solution to this dilemma is not straightforward as demonstrated by Bogo (2007) who studied qualitative data from four research studies. Bogo found that there was an increasing tendency to provide standardised assessment tools within PLOs. The effectiveness of these tools however was dependent on the relational and professional context of PLO's which could negate their value. This situation was partly caused by activities that conflicted with practice teacher's personal and professional values. Heron et al. (2010, p. 18) contends that the individualised nature of assessment can 'defy standardisation'. These findings suggest that there is not a 'one size fits all' approach to the area of direct observations, and that an intricate and informed view of assessment needs to be considered.

Katrien et al. (2006) states that the subject is complicated by a lack of research based evidence linking assessment and student learning. Although this is a widely used assessment technique, little has been written about how this is conducted in live practice. A mystique therefore exists about how practice teacher skills and interventions are applied within the realm of direct observations. Communication is a core aspect of this process and 'clear communication means understanding and feeling understood' (NIPEC RCN, 2008, p. 12). Unfortunately, this is easier to say than to achieve consistently in live practice.

## **Study methodology**

### **Study design**

This research employed a dualistic mixed methods approach that included both qualitative and quantitative data to enhance the research process. Initially a small scale survey using semi structured interviews

was undertaken with a small purposive sample of level 3 students (2) and practice teachers (5). In addition a postal questionnaire was administered to all level 3 students (35) and to a sample of practice teachers (35). This was viewed as important to establish a baseline of current practice and to identify the student experience (Burns, 2000). This baseline data was used to build a picture of the respondents' characteristics and to establish if this influenced their views and practice.

Students were asked questions that related to their experiences in each of their first practice learning opportunities. The use of interviews allowed triangulation with the qualitative and quantitative sections of the questionnaire to corroborate data.

The research study received ethical approval in May 2010 from the Office for Research Ethics Committees Northern Ireland (ORECNI) (10/NIR03/16). The Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) system was utilised to aid the analysis process associated with the quantitative sections of the questionnaire. Qualitative evidence using thematic analysis was matched to specific objectives and themes within the work to provide a framework for analysing the data. Recurring themes were also coded and linked to qualitative data within the questionnaires.

## The findings

The response rate of the questionnaires was lower than anticipated with 9 practice teachers (26%) and 12 students (34%) responding. The following Tables detail characteristics of respondents to the postal questionnaire.

Table 1  
Profile of Students

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Student responses	Male	Female	Total
Number of student respondents to questionnaire	1	11	12
Number of students interviewed	0	2	12
Practice teacher status	PLO 1	PLO 2	
Specialist	8	4	12
Singleton	4	8	12

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Average age = 30 years

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Table 2

Profile of practice teachers

Practice teachers responses	Male	Female	Total
Number of practice teacher respondents to questionnaire	2	7	9
Number of practice teachers interviewed	1	4	5
Practice teacher status	Quest	Interviews	Total
Specialist	2	1	3
Singleton	7	4	11

Average age = 47 years

Average number of years qualified as a social worker = 18 years

Average number of years qualified as a practice teacher = 8 years

## Discussion

The qualitative and quantitative findings of the study are presented together to provide a holistic overview of the research.

### Preparation for direct observations

Goal setting and the approach adopted by the practice teacher are viewed as essential components in attempting to understand the preparation process.

Preparation and goal setting emerged as essential aspects of observations in the qualitative data, particularly within PLO1. Quantitative findings indicate that the majority of students ( $n=11$ ) (92%) within PLO1 and ( $n=10$ ) (83%) within PLO2 were aware of goals being set prior to observations. This contrasts with the predominant practice teacher view that goals were set prior to each observation ( $n=9$ ) (100%). This discrepancy may be due to a lack of communication or the need for more explicit dissemination of goal setting. Comparable research by Freeman (1993) describes how students rate supervision higher when structure was provided. An unexpected finding was that the role of supervision in this process was not as overt as the researcher would have expected. Supervision is often used to prepare for observations and perhaps the respondents believed that this was implicit in their answers.

Two students made the point that preparation for direct observations is most effective when it is delivered close to the event. In any case, 'the importance of thorough preparation in all aspects of practice learning pays dividends' (Douglas and Byrne, 2005p. 59). This view complements Knight's (1996) research into students' perceptions of field instructors (Practice Teachers) in the USA. The results indicated that the educational and task orientated aspects of field instruction (PLO) were the most influential variables. The local research findings report an overwhelming satisfaction amongst students with regard to preparation. All, ( $n=12$ ) (100%) of the students agreed that they were adequately prepared for their direct observation experiences. This is an important point as The University of York (Kowproska et al., 1999) conclude that 'anxiety can be provoked if they [students] do not know what is expected or what will happen'. Combined with the results from goal setting these results indicate high levels of structured preparation being reported in relation to practice teachers within the research.

Students and practice teachers were asked to state a preference for particular observation methods with ( $n=7$ ) (58%) of students, and ( $n=7$ ) (78%) of practice teachers preferring live observation with the practice teacher in the same room. This represented the majority of respondents, and was interesting in light of the student responses. Qualitative data derived from the questionnaires and interviews highlighted the anxieties associated with the live observation process. The researchers' practice experience also indicates that a practice teacher being physically present in an observation adds to anxiety for many students.

A third of students ( $n=4$ ) (33%) and ( $n=2$ ) (22%) of practice teachers preferred a one way mirror as an observation method. Opinions were divided on this method with some individuals being highly enthusiastic and others overtly critical. The key point is that live observation, video – link and one way mirrors are all options within the observation process. The choice to proceed with one is something that should be agreed between students and their practice teachers during a designated preparation process. This is especially pertinent due to the disparity of preferences articulated by students and potentially heightened student anxiety.

The importance of observations as a learning process albeit within these limitations was highlighted, but one finding from the interviews raised some concern. The two student participants of the interview process indicated that they often chose co-operative service users for observations to maximise positive outcomes for their assessment. These comments



were made whilst acknowledging and advocating the need for challenging situations as a learning experience. Both students also understood and supported the need for a variety of observation scenarios with differing numbers of service users, carers and professionals. This view matched current guidance (SHSCT, 2009) issued by the Trust. The guidance states that, 'direct observations should be varied to reflect the student's competence in a range of situations'. Therefore the necessity of 'passing' the PLO tended to supersede the potential benefit of these situations and became the primary objective. Negotiation and agreements between students and practice teachers assume greater significance within the context of this particular finding.

### **The outcomes of using specific preparation and assessment, and de-briefing models.**

The quantitative research findings illustrated that the majority of students ( $n=8$ ) (67%) in PLO1 and ( $n=6$ ) (50%) in PLO2 were not aware of their practice teacher employing a specific framework or model for this purpose. This is concerning as each ( $n=9$ ) (100%) practice teacher respondent stated they *did* use a particular model or framework. These results indicate a lack of communication between practice teachers and students in relation to the existence of these approaches. The findings are not unique as Ixer (2010) found when 100% (49) of students surveyed stated that their practice teacher did not explicitly describe their model of reflection.

Within this local research when students *were aware* of a particular framework being employed this was universally ( $n=4$  PLO1 &  $n=6$  PLO2) (100%) viewed as being helpful. These results are important as when combined with the qualitative data they indicate a more positive observation experience for students. Students reported that an overt framework or model provided 'clear guidelines and a recognised structure' which was viewed as desirable, particularly within their first practice learning opportunity. Freeman's (1993) work highlights that the existence of structure is a positive response to potential student anxiety levels.

The University of York Collaborative Model (Kowproska et al., 1999) was viewed by those practice teachers using it as being useful, but was not implemented in its entirety. The qualitative data indicated University of York being utilised as a 'tool' to be integrated into other approaches

and assessment obligations associated with the observation process. One practice teacher clearly stated that students like the York model. Students suggested that the approach taken by a practice teacher may depend on their background. The importance of using a specific preparation model was highlighted by practice teachers when addressing sectarian or cultural issues.

Findings suggest that the type of framework or model used was not considered important by the students. The key issue was that they were *aware* of the particular approach being employed, and when this occurred, it was helpful. The qualitative data also highlighted that this may be explained by the fact that students knew what was expected from them and what would be assessed. The University of York (Kowproska et al., 1999) conclude that this lessens anxiety as high levels of apprehension stop learning. Consequently the 'outcomes' in terms of this particular area cannot be measured in pass or fail terms, but are quantified in terms of a more positive and helpful observation experience. This is interesting as the work is personified by an increasing reliance on standardised tools. The framework or model was largely irrelevant to the students and clear communication was the central issue.

The ability of practice teachers to adapt formal criteria such as handbook guidelines and present them informally met with approval by both students interviewed. One student spoke about de-briefing conversations in the car following observations when the practice teacher and student were travelling back to the office. This was presented as constructive and linked with practice teacher beliefs that there was a need to be responsive and flexible within the process. Qualitative research by Pollard (2008) highlights that non-formalised learning processes are crucial to the development of students' collaborative skills within practice placements.

The setting of goals was also viewed as positive by students and that structure was needed, so long as it was not too rigid. This theme also replicated practice teachers views in relation to the University of York model being employed as part of an eclectic approach. This ability to be flexible was considered by the practice teachers involved to be a positive influence on the direct observation and enhanced the students' experience.

### **Intervention within direct observations**

The issue of intervening in an observation needs to be considered in terms of

approaches, tools, practice teacher experience and the absence or existence of flexibility. The qualitative data acknowledged the need for the formal aspects of an observation, but highlighted the humanistic nature of the work; 'all social work is a human endeavour, so you can't really separate it out....' (Practice teacher). The basic social work value base was viewed as a legitimate reason for intervention or actions that deviated from the 'script' such as 'making buns' within life skills observations. This may also happen due to issues of safe practice and addressing risk, but includes scenarios where it was deemed to fit with the atmosphere or context of the observation. This included providing clarity and the provision of accurate information to ensure that the service user was not disadvantaged.

This finding is at odds with what Le Riche and Tanner (1998, p. 39) describe as the 'scientific model of observation .... influenced by positivist ideas'. Humphrey (2007, p. 726) acknowledges that 'an observation of students' practice can be neither a pure observation nor a participative encounter'. Kemp (2001) warns against the practice teacher moving frequently from observation to participation and Humphrey (2007, p. 726) states that these instances 'must be strictly rationed'. This research therefore challenges some of the current theorists views that a strict set of circumstances should be met for intervention to occur. This is particularly true in the area of a practice teacher clarifying or providing information which was deemed as acceptable.

The quantitative and qualitative data recovered from the participants indicated that the frequency of interventions was relatively low and occurred in what they would consider appropriate circumstances. One practice teacher (11%) had intervened more than five times whilst the majority ( $n=6$ ) (67%) had intervened once or twice during their practice teaching careers. This fits with the findings of Humphrey (2007) and Kemp (2001) in that participation and intervention may happen, but should be the exception rather than the rule. Kemp (2001, p. 533) suggests the 'assessor must be flexible enough to function at different points along the continuum between participation and observation'.

Qualitative data from the student questionnaires indicates that retaining the option of a practice teacher intervening was seen as important. This positive view of practice teacher professional discretion was replicated within the student interview, and depending on the context, specific and focused intervention was considered to be complementary to the observation process.

This is a complex issue which requires a multi-faceted approach that

acknowledges the unique relationship between practice teachers, students and service users. This is personified in an apparent disconnection between some aspects of the quantitative data and qualitative findings related to intervention. The majority of students ( $n=8$ ) (67%) and ( $n=4$ ) (44%) of practice teachers reported that overall, intervention was not desirable or helpful. The qualitative data gleaned from both groups indicate that professional discretion is viewed as a positive attribute in this area of practice. Within the research findings this depended on the context of the actual direct observation. Therefore intervention, in certain circumstances, if used sparingly, need not impact negatively on the learning experience. This type of discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative findings was also demonstrated by Byrne's (2004) study and student attitudes towards supervision. Situations when students had experienced practice teacher intervention were described as positive, whilst no negative examples of intervention were disclosed by students.

The key message in this debate is intervene sparingly and only in certain circumstances. Humphrey (2007, p. 733) warns against a practice teacher acting as a 'Wild Monkey. ....perpetually roaming around' with a propensity to interrupt. The circumstances that warrant intervention are described by Humphrey as those meeting 'legitimate participation or intervention'.

The research findings indicate that child protection and vulnerable adult issues are the most appropriate and ethical circumstances in which to intervene (student 67% & practice teacher 67%). This reflects the thinking of Le Riche and Tanner (1996) and Dingwall (1980) and highlights the responsibilities of a qualified professional. Qualitative findings emphasise the need for practice teachers to protect both student and service user and this answers a crucial question posed by Humphrey (2007, p. 730) about the purpose of direct observations, namely, 'who is the PLA (practice teacher) there for? The student or the service user?'

### **Limitations of study and suggestions for further research**

The main limitation of the study relates to the relatively small size which means that generalisations are restricted. The 'elephant in the room' throughout all of the research has been the service user. Future research could focus on the issues raised in this study and report on how they are experienced by; and affect service users. The role of supervision would also benefit from further research in terms of preparation and goal setting. The

potential for observations to be included in the Preparation for Practice module of the social work degree could also be explored.

### **Key learning points from the study to improve practice**

This piece of research has highlighted the complex relationships and challenges associated with using direct observations as an assessment method. Key themes and messages emerged from the work including the use of flexibility, professional discretion, partnership and preparation with clear communication at the core. Messages for practice include the following.

1. Practice Teachers and students should together choose the service user and situation to be observed. This discussion should actively incorporate a variety of learning scenarios including the student challenging service users, and being challenged by service users. Therefore the learning experience of circumstances potentially involving conflict should be embraced.
2. Practice Teachers should explicitly identify to the student the particular approach they adopt within observations including any particular frameworks or models.
3. The potential for intervention or participation by the practice teacher should be discussed with the student prior to any observations. The criteria and parameters of any potential intervention or participation should be agreed by both parties.
4. Intervention should be used sparingly and usually only in situations agreed within recommendation (3). The option of practice teacher professional discretion outside these parameters should be maintained but minimised.
5. Preparation for an observation between the practice teacher and student should be conducted close to the actual event. Preparation that occurs weeks in advance should be avoided.
6. Further research to examine the role of supervision and how it is used to prepare for observations would be beneficial.
7. Incorporating academic teaching and practical rehearsal of observations into the Preparation for Practice module of the social work degree should be considered.

## Conclusions

The study has highlighted the complexity of the direct observation process and the need for effective communication between all parties. Communication skills are viewed as essential components in the tool kit of a social worker and are taught on the Preparation for Practice module (NISCC, 2010). This study's findings indicate that further work is required in this area of practice between practice teachers and students. Fox (1998) argues that successful PLO's depend on agreement on goals and the tasks needed to achieve the goals.

Qualitative data indicates that student anxiety reduces when an explicit structure is in place in addition to clear guidelines. The issue of utilising frameworks or models, and student awareness of this, therefore emphasises the importance of explicit dissemination of information. The findings indicate that the actual model or framework being used is not viewed as important. This particular finding resonates with Clapton's (2009) conclusions about models of placement teaching. It also resonates with the view held by Thompson (2011) that the approach should be defined by consistency and adherence to principles rather than slavishly pursuing uniformity.

Evidence gathered in the research indicates that students and practice teachers believe a widening of Humphrey's (2007, p. 728) ideas on 'legitimate participation' is appropriate. There was evidence that practice teacher participation and intervention exceeded the parameters suggested by Humphrey's model. There was limited evidence of this being viewed as negative in actual practice situations. Students and practice teachers indicated *potential* disadvantages of intervention but none of these were cited in real practice scenarios. This is in contrast to a number of positive student views on actual incidents of practice teacher intervention. The key issues in these findings were that flexibility and professional discretion were viewed as positive practice teacher attributes within the observation process.

These findings need to be considered within the context of what was viewed as 'appropriate' by students and practice teachers. Unregulated intervention was viewed as potentially negative and therefore the importance of prior planning and discussion between both parties assumed great significance. The student should not be 'surprised' by the intervention as this could have potentially negative effects. This dynamic should also include the needs and wishes of the service user, but this was beyond the

remit of this research.

The research indicated a high quality level of practice teaching within the sample. Findings in relation to preparation, setting goals, intervention scenarios and student satisfaction with their practice teachers would support this conclusion. A number of areas would however benefit from further development including: choosing observations; communication, and the timing of preparation. The key message is that what may seem obvious is not always obvious. Practice Teachers should clearly articulate to students how they prepare, what they expect and when they may intervene.

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