Practice Learning and Assessment on BSc (Hons) Social Work: 'Service User Conversations'

Tish Elliott, Tina Frazer, Diane Garrard, Julia Hickinbotham, Viv Horton, Julie Mann, Sharon Soper, Jayne Turner, Marie Turner & Andy Whiteford[1]

> I think all service users should get involved with this. I felt really listened to for the first time. (Service User, 2003, University of Plymouth)

The new BSc (Hons) Social Work requires students to undertake an assessed preparation for practice. For students in their first term at the University of Plymouth and Cornwall College, a corner stone of this 'Safety to Practice' assessment is the 'service user conversation'.

Service users and carers meet individually with students to tell them what they think a good social worker should be like. Students write an account of the conversation and are given feedback on their interpersonal skills and on the accuracy of the record. This process involves service users and carers as 'teachers' and contributors to assessment from the beginning, thus reversing the usual power relationship.

The conversations have proved to be a fascinating journey for all those involved, with significant implications for future practice. The students' learning needs come into sharp focus at the very beginning of their course and an assessment of their performance is meaningfully ascertained through this process. The method has been evaluated with many of the service users and carers who were involved and the outcomes of this research are presented.

This innovative and creative process has much to offer in the education and the professional development of new social workers in ways that are both ethical and inclusive. We share the richness of the experience that has gone beyond our expectations and seek to encourage discussion about the possibilities of a fully inclusive approach to social work education.

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Correspondence to: Tish Elliott, Faculty of Health & Social Care, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, UK. Email: tish.elliott@devon.gov.uk

Introduction

The process of service user involvement in various aspects of social care has invited debate regarding the difference between participation and partnership (Powell, 1997; Edwards, 2003), beneficial engagement as opposed to consultation fatigue (Mann, 2003; Duquemin, 2004; Social Care Institute for Excellence [SCIE], 2004), and an analysis of the power dynamics between service providers and service users which emphasises the need for meaningful rather than tokenistic service user involvement (Curran, 1997; Byers & Belcher, 2003). Such debate explores the notion of empowerment, recognising how reductionist representations of 'empowerment' can work in opposition to the emancipatory intention (Humphries, 1996; Annetts *et al.*, 1997). As Curran (1997) concludes, a meaningful engagement process engenders a shift from 'user involvement' to 'user participation' which is key if we are to move towards user-led education. From her research into service user and social work practitioner participation in teaching for a mental health social work course, Curran recognises 'the value of a collective workshop (which) emerges as an intensive and powerful form of reconfiguring power relations' (Curran, 1997, p. 34).

This paper presents an account of how collective workshops held at the University of Plymouth have provided the backdrop for meaningful service user and carer participation in implementing the new degree and how 'service user conversations' have played a key role in assessing whether students are safe to practise in their first year of training.

> Everyone needs to be in on the ground and not halfway through the proceedings.
> (Moffat, 2002, p. 11)

In the South West our experience of the 4th Innovations Conference which focussed on service user and carer involvement in social work education (October 2002) has taught us the importance of service users and carers being involved from the very beginning in both planning and implementing the work. The need to counter professional domination, avoid jargonised language and work from service user perspectives from the start is crucial. As Andy Rickell (2002) emphasises:

> The first stage in empowerment is to get users and carers around the table identifying what they mean by empowerment and what they mean by involvement.
> (Rickell, 2002, p. 10)

Consultation on outcomes alone, whilst meeting recent legal requirements (DoH, 2001, 2002), is insufficient in terms of meaningful engagement. Rickell reflects on the tendency for local authorities to pay lip-service to user consultation whilst the culture of 'we know best' prevails. Rickell points out that one area where organisations can go wrong is only consulting with those who turn up on the day, not researching any gaps in representation. He emphasises four priorities for meaningful engagement:

1. the need for users and carers to feel they have made a difference;
2. for users and carers to feel that consultation is designed in such a way they can take part;

3. for users and carers, having given their views, to see what has been done with their feedback and to be able to comment on this; and
4. to have an action plan for implementation so users and carers can see changes that arose from the consultation.

In this paper we explore how these important principles have been followed in user and carer involvement in the new degree at the University of Plymouth and Cornwall College, and what still needs to be done.

> User involvement can leave people feeling tired, cynical, disillusioned—is their participation really making a difference? Are they still marginalised, disenfranchised, excluded? If nothing or little changes they not surprisingly become burnt out, they suffer consultation fatigue, they become sceptical. If no feedback is given to service users and nothing changes, why on earth would they want to be involved? (Mann, 2003, Conference Paper, unpublished)

First Steps in Service User Involvement: Networking

At stakeholders meetings held at the University of Plymouth during 2002 a working party was established to promote service user and carer involvement in the new degree in line with government initiatives outlined in the consultation paper *A Quality Strategy for Social Care* (DoH, 2000). To this effect a lecturer and practice teacher who had worked in front line social work locally visited voluntary sector organisations with whom they had previously had contact, taking copies of government guidelines and explaining the changes in social work training. They outlined tasks that service users may be interested in, such as interviewing prospective students, teaching in workshops and developing documentation to demonstrate occupational standards. Having explained what was happening the emphasis was on 'What do *you* want to do?' rather than 'This is where you might fit in'.

Aware that social work education lagged behind other good practice models of service user involvement by more than a decade, members of the working party researched exemplars of good practice such as the Wiltshire and Swindon Users Network, Folk.us, Citizens As Trainers Group and Young People Presenting Educational Entertainment Group linked to the social work departments at Bath University, Exeter University, and Salford University respectively, and the Centre for Citizen Participation at Brunel University.

Although anxious about the existing demands made on people regarding service user and carer involvement, the working party were encouraged by the positive responses of groups and individuals. The developing network included local groups from Age Concern, the Golden Girls' Group (a self-help group for older people), Folk.us (a service users research group), the Children's Society Advocacy Service, NCH Action for Children, Young Carers, the Youth Enquiry Service, MIND and several mental health groups in the region. Workshops were arranged to develop practice learning for the new degree where service users and carers, academics and

practitioners worked collaboratively. Some considered how students might demonstrate occupational standards and scrutinised programme documentation to see whether it was accessible, others looked at resourcing issues.

Practice Learning Development Workshops, University of Plymouth and Cornwall College

These workshops started in February 2003, and took place every 4–6 weeks at the University of Plymouth until July 2004 when the initial tasks were completed and a user/carer consultative group was set up. A programme for the first workshop was devised by the facilitator, a Senior Social Work Lecturer, and decisions made to split the developmental work into three separate areas, each to be worked on by one sub-group. It was hoped that working in small groups would facilitate full participation and an emotionally accessible as well as physically accessible environment for service users and carers (Preston-Shoot, 1987).

On the morning of the first workshop approximately 20 people arrived, three of whom were service users or carers, the rest were a mix of academic and agency staff. An overview was given to participants on the new degree and the GSCC requirements (DoH, 2002). Input was then given from each of the three sub-group facilitators to give people informed choice about which sub-group they wished to join. Participants were given choice at the start of each subsequent workshop as to which group they wanted to work in on that day, thus members could change groups if they wished. Over the 18 months the workshops have been meeting, the ratio of service users/carers to professionals has changed significantly, the former now making up at least 50% of each workshop (approximately 20–30 participants in total).

From the first workshop it became abundantly clear that working from the GSCC requirements (DoH, 2002) and National Occupational Standards (TOPSS, 2002) would mean only tokenistic participation of service users and carers due to their prescriptive nature. The realisation dawned on the group that the only way to do this was to start from the point of 'what should a student social worker look like at each stage of practice'. This was a transforming moment as it was the first step towards real and meaningful collaboration between 'professionals' and 'service users and carers'[2] (Curran, 1997; SCIE, 2004). This has been the ethos of all subsequent workshops. Out of this came the notion of service users and carers talking individually with students about what they wanted from social workers. Initially an 'interview' between service user or carer and student was planned. However service users involved in developing this aspect of the new degree pointed out that calling these 'interviews' made it feel like service users were being assessed whereas the focus was on service users assessing students and students listening to what service users wanted from social workers. As Harper *et al.* (2003) suggest, user involvement should be more than only inviting individuals to talk about their distress. 'Interview' was changed to 'conversation', and student conversations with service users and carers became a key part of the 'safety to practice' assessment of students in the first year of their training.

Issues and Outcomes from the Practice Learning Workshops

A number of issues arose during the course of the workshops which have hindered the participation of service users and carers, requiring us to look further at access arrangements, payments for work undertaken, labelling theory, group dynamics and power issues.

Access Issues

These have ranged from the seemingly straightforward but frustratingly difficult task of finding a suitable chair for a service user through to a disabled toilet being too small for wheelchair access. Working from the anticipatory practice philosophy of the Disability Discrimination Act (DoH, 1995) we need to ensure that hearing loops, visual aids, and good access arrangements are made for all meetings, paying attention to detail and the time it takes to ensure this.

Payments

GSCC funds are available to support user involvement, however the level of remuneration is very low (£10 per conversation to include the fee and expenses), compounded by the fact that payment can affect some income-related benefits. This is the cause of much anxiety for service users and carers. Several systems for payment have been tried, none of which have been satisfactory, so the problem remains and is a national one (Ladyman, 2003). A working party at one of the workshops looked at ways of addressing the problem, such as developing links with the Job Centre through a Disability Officer and directing people to the Mental Health Foundation's booklet *A Fair Day's Pay* (Scott, 2003). Realistic payment which values service users and carers for their work remains a fundamental problem.

Labelling

Service users at the workshops have initiated useful discussion on the impact of labelling (Goffman, 1990) leading to professionals questioning role definitions as a cultural norm at meetings which needed to be adjusted. At the start of each workshop people introduced themselves and stated their role, such as, lecturer, service user, practice teacher, carer. This categorisation initiated discussion prompted by a service user feeling 'pigeon-holed' into service user status only, other aspects of identity being sidelined. Participants now define themselves if they wish to do so and in the way they wish, and the minutes no longer include roles or organisational position, only names.

Confidentiality

When a service user questioned the reality of what 'confidentiality' meant in workshops an interesting discussion ensued regarding the ownership of information

service users and carers gave about themselves (Hugman & Smith, 1995). The decision was made that it was the responsibility of each individual to decide whether or not they were happy for their personal experiences to be used as anecdotal evidence to illustrate service user/carer perspectives more widely, and to let others in the group know their position on this.

Power Imbalance

The workshops continually sought to reduce power imbalance (Mullender & Ward, 1985, 1991; SCIE, 2004) but were unsuccessful in some respects, for example professionals chaired the workshops and facilitated small groups. The evaluation highlighted that some service users continued to experience an element of tokenism and paternalism.

In spite of these difficulties positive outcomes have been encouraging. Service users and carers have become increasingly involved in active participation in the workshops and a number have openly stated how their confidence and self-esteem have grown as a direct result. Service users and carers are participating for the first time in assessment panels monitoring student progress in practice learning, and in the conversations with students giving direct feedback on student practice. In addition, participation in the programme is often the only break some carers get from caring. In setting up the new service user/carer consultative group careful attention has been paid to further reducing power imbalance. The first meeting, chaired by the original university facilitator, was attended by 12 service users and carers and five professionals. At this meeting service users and carers decided their own agenda and their own facilitators for future meetings.

The Service User/Carer Conversations

Setting Up Service User and Carer Conversations with Students

A number of service users and carers put themselves forward as willing to take part in the conversations through the workshops. Others came forward through local agencies providing practice learning and by word of mouth. Some were involved with large national organisations such as MIND, others with smaller local organisations. Practice Learning Managers undertook the tasks involved in arranging the conversation, ensuring a managed and supportive environment was available, and assessing students as safe to practise at the end of the process.

Preparation of Students for the Service User Conversation

The students were prepared through an academic module designed to teach Foundations for Professional Practice where teachers supported students in facilitated action learning sets, encouraging them to become self-directed learners.

Preparation of the Service User/Carer

All service users and carers expressing an interest in the conversations with students were asked to provide some basic information (name, address, telephone number, preferred contact times and time available), and also a short self-description. Practice Learning Managers then contacted the service users or carers individually. The venue for the conversation needed to be managed, safe and well supported, with disability access as a high priority. Service users were asked for their preference for the venue so that they felt comfortable. A substantial number of the conversations took place at the university/college with the Practice Learning Managers as support in a nearby room. Other conversations took place in agencies such as a day centre for people with learning disabilities, where the service users had access to known support staff. These relationships were to prove invaluable in arranging conversations and obtaining service user feedback, overcoming any assumptions that cognitive or communication difficulties would necessarily exclude some service users from involvement in social work training (Fisher & Coyle, 1999). Our experiences during this first year of the new degree taught us to be more aware of situations which might need additional preparation and follow up, such as hospital admission, episode of mental illness, or difficulties in communication between the student and service user. We now ensure that a known support person is nominated by each service user or carer prior to the conversation with permission established for the practice learning manager to contact the support person should a complex situation arise or assessment of current risk/need be indicated.

Conversations about the Conversation: A Student's Perspective

> The initial concept of the "service user conversation" was quite a difficult one to understand. I spent the first couple of weeks in complete panic. This I think was mainly due to lack of information, as my learning style (a reflector) is such that I need as much input as possible in relation to what to expect. Had this not been the first year the service user conversation had been used I would have felt more at ease—if I had been able to speak to previous year's students who had been through the same process. The "Foundations for Professional Practice" module used role play as a rehearsal method for the conversation and the "Communications" module encouraged us to focus on "tuning in". [Student, Year One, BSc (Hons) Social Work, University of Plymouth, 2004]

Initially students expressed some confusion, as they were under the impression that this 'tuning in' process (Shulman, 1992) required gathering detailed information about the service user and their care needs prior to the meeting rather than a process that happens when two people sit down together. This has been useful learning for both students and teachers. Another area highlighted by students was their learning regarding note-taking. Some service users wanted students to take more detailed notes, feeling it did not convey attention to detail if the student wrote very little, others preferred the student to listen actively and take very few notes. Again this has been useful learning for both students and teachers, and advice is now given to

students to check service users' views on note-taking at the beginning of the conversation.

> Looking back on the conversation I now realise what a valuable learning experience it has been. It did give me confidence in my abilities relatively early on in the course and I took some confidence from the carer's feedback on the conversation. [Student, Year One, BSc (Hons) Social Work, University of Plymouth, 2004]

How Useful Was the Feedback in Terms of Assessing the Students as Safe to Practise?

The service user/carer was invited to:

* comment on whether the student made it clear as to why they were there;
* comment on whether the student listened actively;
* verify the student's report and whether it was an accurate representation of the conversation.

The students were asked to reflect in a written piece on their own learning. If a student engaged in a conversation that did not go particularly well they could still pass if the student showed good insight into why that might have been and what they learned from the interaction and feedback.

The service user conversation proved to be an extremely useful assessment tool with wide-ranging application. It gave the student, the practice learning manager and the tutor:

* an indication of the basic communication skills of the student from service user feedback;
* an indication of whether the student could link theory to practice from the student's reflective account;
* feedback on specific skills such as the ability of the student to structure and end a conversation;
* it indicated the student's ability to ask useful and pertinent questions;
* it provided evidence of the student's ability to take notes and be accurate when reporting information that was shared by the service user/carer;
* it provided evidence of the student's ability to reflect on feedback regarding their skills, strengths and areas for development.

In addition:

* the values and assumptions a student might make about service users were explored and commented on for further growth and self-awareness;
* the conversation indicated if the student could manage their own time, be reliable and attend to confidentiality; and
* the student's ability to remain mindful of the service user or carer's commitments and tiredness were assessed.

The students' behaviour was judged against service user-defined criteria which were then matched to the Codes of Practice (GSCC, 2002) and National Occupational Standards (TOPSS, 2002) to assess whether they had communicated in a caring, trustworthy and understanding manner, and whether they were good at listening to the service user. Dishonesty, unreliability, an uncaring attitude and offensive or threatening behaviour meant the student could not be deemed safe to practise and could not go forward to their 40 days practice learning in Year One. Feedback from service users and carers on the conversation gave students and their Practice Learning Managers a clear insight into the student's learning needs and areas for future development, as well as the student's strengths.

At times shortfalls in more than one area were evident in a student's portfolio. The conversation provided the opportunity to attend to the student's learning needs within three months of starting on the course, rather than at the end of the first year, which has been extremely beneficial.

Evaluation of the Conversations from the Service User and Carers' Perspective

Once all the conversations between students and service users/carers were completed, conversations and materials were evaluated in order to learn from these initial experiences. This evaluation was discussed at the practice learning workshops, therefore service users and carers were at the forefront of designing and developing the wording of the questionnaire for the research (Beresford, 1992). Two qualified professionals *not* involved in the service user conversations themselves undertook the evaluation interviews, visiting service users and carers in their own homes or where they felt most comfortable, in order to gain in depth answers to the questionnaire. The evaluation was intended to explore service users' and carers' experience of the conversations, to debrief, offer support, and gather feedback from service users and carers on how to improve the process of the conversations. This emphasises the importance of service users and carers receiving feedback on the impact of their involvement, rather than involvement being tokenistic (Rickell, 2002). It also gave us an opportunity to check with service users and carers as to whether they would like to be involved in other areas of the degree programme to further their input and to ensure there were no unresolved issues. However, the semi-structured interview format placed an additional burden of time on service users and carers, and it would have been preferable in modelling good practice in service user involvement if service users rather than professionals had undertaken the research. We need to attend in future to additional payments to service users and carers participating in the evaluation, and to service users and carers themselves undertaking the research, receiving a realistic payment for their work.

The evaluation was carried out by the University of Plymouth, where 33 service users and carers had met with 56 students to engage in discussion about what a good social worker looks like. Of the 33, 26 service users and carers completed the evaluation questionnaire. Three of these questionnaires were sent by return of post, the remainder were completed by a semi-structured, face-to-face interview. The

majority of service users and carers described themselves as White or White British; a small number of dual heritage/mixed race users and carers engaged in the process. Fifteen of the respondents were women and 11 were men. Eight described themselves as service users, nine as carers, and seven gave differing self-definitions of status such as 'student user at the day centre for people with learning disabilities' and 'survivor of the mental health services'.

Overall the majority of service users and carers felt that the conversations were a good experience, only one felt that it was a poor experience. Service users and carers met with a varying number of students: nine saw one student; nine saw two students; three saw three students; two saw four; and three saw six. The evaluation suggested that between one and four conversations per service user was the optimum.

Most felt that the conversations were useful. One commented:

> Having an impact as a service user or carer early on in someone's career is a crucial foundation for Social Work. It's important for trainee social workers to hear what has worked well and what has been unhelpful. There needs to be people out there who will listen to carers and see them as part of the solution not part of the problem. (Carer)

Another positive comment was that:

> I was a part of the whole process as well as the conversation itself and it's important for social workers to listen in this way. (Service User)

The only negative comments in this section stemmed from some students not appearing to listen to service users' and carers' contributions, issues which were picked up by the Practice Learning Managers as learning needs for these students.

The length of the conversation varied from 30 minutes to 75 minutes. Three felt that the conversations were too long, two felt that they were too short and the remainder felt that they were the right length. However, some highlighted difficulties with the ending of the conversations. This will require further work with the students before the next run of conversations.

Most found that the topic of conversation was useful. It was important that service users and carers did not feel too exposed to giving personal information (Harper *et al.*, 2003). Some gave personal information very freely, so it was helpful to have a topic to guide the conversation. This returns to the theme of positive involvement resulting in the empowerment of service users and carers (Humphries, 1996). Nineteen found that they talked about other topics, and out of these 15 felt that this was helpful and three felt that it was unhelpful. Many service users and carers wished to talk about their own interests and situations. There was a tension between keeping within the topic and moving into areas of social work practice. It was essential to steer clear of emotive feelings and situations. As one service user stated:

> It's helpful to talk about other things because I didn't want to talk too much about my illness. That's why "interview" was changed to "conversation" so you didn't have to bare your souls. I wouldn't have anyway but this made it easier. (Service User)

Concerning how the conversations could be improved, most raised practical issues, such as the importance of finding a comfortable and relaxed environment. This highlighted problems of meeting in agencies where neither student nor service user felt at home enough to make a drink or know where the refreshments were. There was also varying support and contact from the course:

> There was a lack of feedback from the student and the university, such as no follow up call from the university or named person from university. The process was dragged out for up to two weeks after the interview, waiting for the forms. (Carer)

Clearly the process and consistency of conversations needs to be tightened. Concerning whether service users and carers felt that they would have done anything differently, 13 stated that they would not have done anything differently, six said they would, whereas eight were non-committal.

Regarding support, 19 felt able to obtain support if needed from family, friends or an organisation. Some received support from the programme, such as help completing the forms after the conversation. This was an option open to all service users and carers. However, three commented upon how concerned they were about the lack of structured support for service users and carers. Such as:

> I'm worried about whether a service user would know where to receive support. They should have a follow up call after the conversation to check that the service user and carer is OK. It should not be assumed that the service user and carer are able to seek support. The students seemed well supported. (Service User)

Service users and carers had varying experiences concerning when they received their expenses, an area needing a great deal of further work and standardisation. Fourteen received their expenses promptly, nine explained that it took a long time and five did not answer.

When given the opportunity to make any other comments, service users and carers focused upon previous themes concerning difficulties with venues and payments. In addition new difficulties were raised around the length of time receiving feedback from students. Giving the two sets of feedback (on the conversation and on the report) was valuable but the report needed to be received quickly or it was difficult to recollect detail and give specific and meaningful feedback.

Some commented upon how they had felt empowered and valued as part of this process:

> I really enjoy being involved, it made such a difference to me, as it has built upon my confidence. People do listen to me and I can put my views across. It also so improved my sense of self worth. (Service User)

Those who had been involved in the practice learning workshops were able to draw upon their experience. Although a positive comment, this indicates the need to ensure that all service users and carers are comfortable and familiar with the process. Finally, one person reminded us of the need to widen involvement and participation:

> The only problem is that this kind of involvement does not get around the brick walls service users and carers face. Only able service users and carers, such as those

who are proactive are involved. Need to target those who are less likely to get involved. (Service User)

At the end of the questionnaire there were a series of yes/no answers where information was either repeated or not expanded upon by service users and carers. This was because of the structure of the questionnaire, which needs to be refined.

Concerning whether they would complete the conversations again, two said no, one said maybe and 23 said yes. One of the negative comments was that:

> I still feel there is an element of tokenism and paternalism. Such as in workshops professionals still take the lead, no autonomy offered to service users. So not until issues are sorted. (Service User)

Two stated that they would not encourage others to be involved, two said maybe and 20 said that they would encourage others. Finally, four did not wish to continue their involvement, 11 offered to be more involved, and eight wished to know more about how they could be involved. Three did not answer this question. Many were already involved in other aspects of the course that raised other insights such as:

> It's nice to know the student progress, at the end of their degree. It would be nice for users to have some feedback from the students about how they felt about the users, but only brief. (Service User)

At the culmination of the practice learning workshops in July 2004 students fed back to service users and carers their overwhelming view that the conversation had been a positive experience for them and a useful quality assurance tool.

Evaluation of the Conversations from the Students' Perspective

We will need to properly research the impact on students at the end of this, their second, year. However, early indications are that students have: learned the importance of structuring interviews and having a clear purpose; developed their communication style and empathy; practised accurate recording; and considered appropriate endings. The service user conversations have given students an opportunity to begin to link theory to practice with regard to health and safety issues, valuing diversity and assessing their practice against the Codes of Practice (GSCC, 2002) prior to their 200 days practice learning in local agencies. Practice Learning Managers have been able to look at individual student's learning needs and judge how far the student has travelled in the early stages of their training whilst the students have learned the value of reflective practice.

Identifying Gaps in Representation

Initial networking resulted in a very positive response from users of mental health services, people with physical disabilities, people with learning disabilities, and from carers of relatives with a variety of needs. However, a number of gaps in representation have been evident, in particular engaging service users and carers

from Black and Minority Ethnic groups, engaging children and young people, and engaging service users and carers involved in child protection.

Service providers engaged in a research project to promote better engagement with Black and Minority Ethnic people in Plymouth undertaken by Anthea Duquemin (2004) identified two main barriers to BME involvement: that White society lacks confidence in working with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people, and that Black and Minority Ethnic people do not trust the mainstream services. Duquemin's toolkit provides information and suggestions for organisations to achieve change 'by both reaching outwards and looking inwards', recognising that both perspectives are needed to address the barriers and promote racial equality at an institutional level. Using this comprehensive guide and existing contacts with the local Islamic Centre, refugee and BME organisations it is hoped that meaningful engagement can develop in future that does not result in the consultation fatigue often felt by BME groups in this predominantly white area (Dhalech, 1999).

As regards engaging young people, some inroads have been made with care leavers and young carers with the help, expertise and guidance of the Children's Society and Devon Young Carers. As these agencies have pointed out, as part of the initial contact, Practice Learning Managers need to check the age and legal status of the young person, and establish whether a parent, foster carer or social worker with parental responsibility needs to give parental consent for their involvement. We would like to attend to the inclusion of younger children in our future planning (Hennessy, 1999), involving agencies known to the young person in setting up the conversations in much the same way as we have when including adults with learning disabilities, i.e. with a trusted adult involved to facilitate the process. However, we need to be wary of treating certain service user groups, such as people with learning disabilities, or children and young people, as homogenous groups with the same needs (McKenzie *et al.*, 1999).

Some tensions are to be expected regarding service user involvement where there is an element of social control in the user contact, such as child protection or compulsory section under the Mental Health Act 1983. A number of service users hospitalised due to mental ill health have been engaged in the new degree locally and have been extremely helpful in developing the programme. However we have yet to engage those involved in child protection. It is tempting to assume that the very nature of child protection, the extent of stigmatisation, and the anger often felt by service users subject to an investigation of this nature would preclude anyone from coming forward as a service user representative to the programme. It may be that seeking to engage those currently involved in child protection investigations would indeed be unhelpful, untimely and insensitive, but this will not always be the case, and would be counter to inclusive practice. Given that the overwhelming feedback from service users and carers involved in the student conversations so far has been that they find it a useful and empowering experience to talk to trainees about what social workers should and shouldn't do, such involvement could be an important and empowering process for these service users also, who often feel at the extreme end of disempowerment.

Our Learning from the Process

Improvements to be made in the conversations themselves following feedback from service users and carers include:

- students completing more work around endings with Practice Learning Managers before undertaking conversations;
- more consideration regarding the suitability of venues for conversations, such as parking, access and drinks facilities;
- more consideration given to how many students service users and carers meet with on a 1:1 basis;
- ensuring feedback from students is received promptly by service users and carers;
- ensuring consistency and standardisation of the process such as payments, support, information and contact from the programme;
- as regards the evaluation of service user and carer conversations, we need to refine the questions to avoid repetition; and
- the database should follow data protection and ethical standards, and ensure that information on how service users and carers will receive support, if needed, is included.

One other key learning point so far is the importance of being mindful that crises can arise for service users and carers between one phone call, student conversation, or collaborative workshop and the next. As one service user suggested:

> You need to start any conversation by asking how are you/how is the person you are caring for, is it ok to talk about social work students right now?

The Practice Learning Managers are considering whether conversations could take place in small groups at the same venue. The Practice Learning Managers could then welcome service users and carers as a whole before conversations take place between individual students and users/carers. After conversations are completed the Practice Learning Managers could debrief students and service users, and have lunch together. This would make it a social event and ensure that all are well supported.

Progressing Service User and Carer Involvement

A service user and carer consultative group has been established as a direct consequence of this evaluation. The group will be as independent of the programme as possible and will be service user and carer led in a further attempt to reduce the imbalance of power between users and professionals. It is hoped that other service users and carers may feel able to join.

Service users and carers have suggested that students should meet with users and carers in Years Two and Three of their degree to complete further conversations on what users and carers would like from social workers. As one carer helpfully suggested, in later stages of their training students could take more of a lead, such as arranging the conversations, booking rooms, making sure refreshments are available and sending out maps ensuring service users have directions etc. This could then be

part of the student assessment, students demonstrating their ability to organise and take on responsibility.

In conclusion, the majority of service users and carers who have taken part in the student conversations so far have felt that this is an important part of the students' safety for practice assessment. The impact on students has been very powerful.

> It is very important that we develop the conversation for assessment in the second and third year of the degree. It is a "breakthrough" concept for student learning. (Service User, University of Plymouth, 2004)

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Notes

[1] Conference presenters: Tina Frazer, Viv Horton, Sharon Soper, Jayne Turner & Marie Turner. This was a joint presentation by a service user and a carer, a student who has been assessed as safe to practise through this process, and Practice Learning Managers who manage, develop and are responsible for this assessment.

[2] The term 'service user' refers to users and ex-users of social care services and the term 'carer' refers to those who have, or have had, caring responsibilities for users of social care services. It is important to acknowledge that service users and carers involved in collaborative work in the new degree are working in a professional capacity whilst representing their own and others views and experiences of a very personal nature. Similarly those in professional roles often have, and speak from, personal experience as service users or carers. The terminology used in this paper reflects the roles in which people are primarily working within the collective developing the new degree in a local programme. The limitations of this terminology are recognised.

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