

Service User Involvement in Social Work Education

A case study

A DISCUSSION PAPER FROM THE CENTRE FOR WELFARE REFORM

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I. Introduction

This paper will evaluate the involvement of service users and carers in social work education focusing on the UK. The history of service user and carer involvement in social work goes back to the 1970s when there was a distinct shift from institutional to community care based on an emerging social model of disability and a more emancipatory or participatory approach within social work, which represented a paradigmatic shift from being passive recipients of services to being actively engaged in shaping their own lives. It built on a strengths based approach, focusing on task and person-centred practice. Active involvement of service users and carers can enhance student learning; increasingly service user involvement is an expectation rather than simply desirable.

The training of social work students requires an understanding of service user feedback. However how can this be embedded within social work training? Generally, a service user is someone in receipt of services or support – the common factor is that they have lived experience or knowledge in relation to their needs.

Carers are often referred to as ‘secondary’ service users as they may be looking after somebody with for example, learning difficulties or mental health needs but arguably, have their own particular needs which necessitates a focus on their situation in their own right.

It has to be acknowledged that there can be conflicting views between the different parties. For example, at the most extreme, there is a conflict between the needs of survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence. Social work students need to learn about the dynamics and inter-personal relationships in order to become better practitioners; early involvement and exposure to the service user or carer perspective is essential to this learning.

As social work training has moved from a generic to specialist approach based on a degree level qualification with an emphasis on registration with the relevant professional body (for example, Social Work England) the notion of being fit for purpose and accountable has led to the need for external validation.

This is reinforced by the code of conduct which states that service users and carers must be involved in the delivery of social work training. For individual students, direct observations carried out during their placements involve a process where service user consent and feedback is required. I have reviewed the relevant literature in order to develop an ideal or distilled

model of service user involvement. This will be applied by means of a SWOT analysis to the Experts by Experience group (known as EXES) which meets quarterly within the Faculty of Health and Social Care at the University of Derby and provides additional learning opportunities for social work students in respect of 1 to 1 role plays, case studies, lectures or interviews in order to promote the service user experience.

2. Background

There is a wealth of evidence regarding service user involvement in social work education as evidenced by Levin (2004), Waterson and Morris (2005), Stevens and Tanner (2006) and Webber (2013). The involvement of service users emerged as part of the changing landscape of social work training following the Seebohm Report (1968) and the reorganisation of local government in 1974.

1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s
Institutional Model	Normalisation	Participation	Emancipatory Approach

Table 1. A shift in thinking

The recognition of different needs led to changes in legislation for example, the ground breaking Children’s Act 1989. In respect of vulnerable adults this change was eventually enshrined in Human Rights Act 1998, the Equality Act 2010 (which recognises protected characteristics) and more recently, the Care Act 2014. Social work students are expected to work with different vulnerable groups although in practice, they may specialise with either children or adults. However ‘learning by doing’ (Gibbs 1988) is a key aspect of the 200 days of practice which helps to develop both ‘craft’ knowledge regarding social work as well as the softer skills required when working with a diverse group of people, for example, listening and interviewing skills, positive regard (Rogers, 1951) as well as the ability to learn from case studies or directly from service users. BASW (2018) reinforced the nine areas within the Professional Capabilities Framework (known as the PCF) which have been grouped into three broader areas known as ‘super domains’ measuring Purpose, Practice and Impact. Student social workers are assessed against the revised PCF and are asked to gain feedback from service users whilst on placement.

3. Towards an inclusive model

The engagement of service users and carers mirrors the emancipation agenda initially promoted by (physically) disabled people and their allies or supporters leading to changes in legislation. Key authors include Brandon (1989 and 1995), Whitaker (1990), Davis (1990), Beresford and Croft (1992 and 1993), Ward (1997), Godley (1997), Braye (2000), Barnes and Mercer (2006), Duffy (2006 and 2013), Gross (2011) and many other champions of disability rights. For adults with learning difficulties, this was highlighted later by the Valuing People White Paper (2001) which produced a national strategy based on ‘nothing about us without us’ (Charlton 1998).

The ideas of co-production and self-directed support led to many innovative changes including the use of easy to read minutes using Symbolright and joint agendas, co-chairing of meetings, the promotion of independent advocacy as well as the promotion of user led and managed services heavily supported by direct payments for care. This golden age of independence was widely prevalent in Health and Social Care from about 2000-2010 until the Coalition government in the UK made a political decision to introduce the Austerity programme (Alston, 2018) which has persisted for 10 years and led to major cuts in advocacy and the voluntary sector as well as statutory services.

In addition, the underpinning values of social work are embedded in anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli 2002, Thompson 2016), enhancing an agenda of making a difference whilst supporting positive change in terms of the impact on both services and more importantly, service users themselves. Students must be able to reflect in and on their action (Schon 1983) and use various reflective tools, for example, Kolb (1984), Gibbs (1988), or Moon (1999) in order to improve their practice, achieve better outcomes and reflect on their performance.

As a student social worker, it is necessary to work in a safe and protected environment in order to gain the experience and understanding before qualifying. Even after completion of the degree there is an expectation that newly qualified social workers will undertake a further year of practice with a protected (in theory reduced) caseload and increased supervision by a mentor (known as AYSE or the Assessed Year of Supported Employment). The promotion of social justice is key to that. Working with service users is regarded as the pinnacle of best practice and is well documented in the work of Doel and Best (2008), *Experiencing Social work: Learning from*

Service Users. Their chapter 'Learning from self advocates' is based on the organisation this author set up and ran for 25 years. Interviews with 8 service users (who were tenants with learning difficulties supported by the charity) highlighted the learning points for social work students.

They are summarised as follows (Doel and Best, *ibid* p. 101):

1. Developing understanding and not being judgemental.
2. Respecting confidentiality and building trust
3. Joining in activities
4. Putting people at ease and making connections
5. Opening doors and recognising strengths
6. Creating choices
7. Experiencing difference
8. Managing endings and transitions

The understanding of the students' role and impact on service users whilst, in addition, giving voice and listening to their needs is an active part of engagement. Service users are experts in their own lives and by using theoretical approaches, including a strengths based approach (Saleeby 1996), task-centred social work (Coulshed and Orme 1998) or person-centred thinking and planning (O'Brien and Lyle O'Brien 1988), it is possible for student social workers to potentially address the power imbalance by learning to interact based on the mutual respect advocated by Brandon (1989) and positive regard promoted by Carl Rogers in the 1960s. As effective communication skills can only be learned through interaction with service users and therefore exposure to the real world experience during training is not only beneficial but essential; hence the active engagement of service users and carers in the learning process. Achieving change for the better must involve participation, consent (which is all too often assumed) and the full or active engagement of service users. There is literature regarding the oppressive nature of the welfare state which portrays social workers as instruments of the state and service users as their 'prey' (Corrigan and Leonard 1978) but generally the involvement of service users is seen as positive in the learning and development of social work students.

Irvine, Molyneux and Gilman (2015) suggested that service users can provide a link with the real world (as opposed to the false scenario of role plays between students and academics). They found that students felt that the benefits of involving service users involve 'providing a link with the real world'; it 'breaks down some of the barriers'; is 'absolutely critical'; 'challenges your value base'; and provides 'such a good grounding'.

Beresford (2012, p.203) states that ‘Involving users brings new ‘experiential knowledge’, new ideas, new insights into the equation’.

Irvine et al (ibid) carried out research with social work students who commented that listening to service users as guest speakers linked them to the real world which had an impact on their learning long after they had qualified. However Carey (2009) believes empathy can quickly disappear under the pressure of workload which may be more a symptom of burnout or work-related stress than a lack of empathy or concern. Beresford (2012) advocated the need for new approaches to practice and professional education. His later work that year with Boxall (2012) stated that changes would be needed within universities in order to incorporate the views of service users into the curriculum. Otherwise this can be compromised by the powerful relationship underpinning the social work role and function, disguised compliance (Reder, Duncan and Gray 1993) ‘yeah saying’ (Sigelman 1981) or simply adopting a tick box exercise which could undermine the role of service user involvement in its ideal form as tokenistic (Arnstein 1969). In other parts of the curriculum, service user and carer involvement can be critical in terms of internal feedback, module design, teaching style and peer review or in terms of external validation.

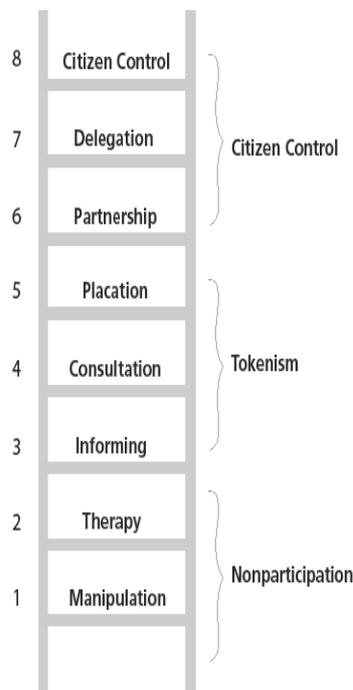


Figure 1. Degrees of Citizens' Participation, Arnstein's Ladder 1969

Arnstein's ladder of citizen's participation (based on citizen involvement in community development in the USA) in Figure 1 describes rungs of the ladder equating to levels of involvement which can be applied to any participatory activity.

Arnstein moves from non-participation at levels 1 and 2 through to information giving (level 3 with no channel for feedback) to a more consultative approach (level 4) to placation level 5 (some people on the committee to provide feedback). All 5 levels are minimal in terms of engagement and the power rests with the agency. Levels 6-8 involve partnership, planning (level 6) through to user led control (level 7) and a redistribution of power which is the 'ideal' approach or pinnacle for service user and carer involvement (level 8).

4. An ideal type?

Representatives should come from organisations rather than represent themselves as individual service users (Beresford and Boxall, *ibid*). This is deemed preferable as it is more sustainable and allows continuity as well as congruence in terms of the acknowledgement of current anti-oppressive approaches and the social model of disability.

However the loss of funding under the Austerity programme (2010-2020), as evidenced by Toynbee and Walker (2020), has led to a huge reduction in funding leading to the closure of projects deemed to be ‘non-essential’, for example, advocacy schemes or user led organisations, for example, the nationwide partnership boards funded and set up as part of the Valuing People Agenda (2001 onwards) have all but disappeared. This in turn has led to greater fragmentation which can lead to poorer representation reverting to the more tokenistic approach on the lower rungs of the citizen participation ladder identified by Arnstein (*ibid*).

The ideal components of a service user and carer involvement strategy within universities can be extrapolated from the literature moving service user involvement from a functional practice to a more equitable and sustainable approach which includes the following:

- A strong commitment to real and effective partnership between service users and carers as well as staff on social work education programmes.
- The full involvement of service users and carers providing balanced education and best practice based on listening to their lived experience.
- Involvement at all levels for example, teaching, interviews and review.
- Involvement of as wide a range of groups as possible, ideally representing organisations rather than speaking as themselves. This allows for better representation, continuity, provides cover and greater accountability.
- Better reflection of wider society in terms of ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, age, class and economic status.
- Involvement of marginalised groups for example, homeless people, children in or young people leaving care, cancer survivors.
- Sustainability in terms of resources, payment for time, administrative support, training, travel expenses, advocacy if support is needed to enable attendance or better understand the meeting.

- Recognition of service users in their own right as equal participants in the delivery of social work education in its broadest sense, for example, setting agendas, co-chairing meetings, attending meetings or conferences, access to intranet and 'owning' their own web page and more as the benefits of fuller participation are explored and better understood.
- Selection of new members based on representative organisations so that the existing practices of self-interest or under representation of marginal groups can be addressed.

This moves service user involvement from a process driven to a more outcome driven strategy based on a more sustainable and equal partnership.

5. Applying theory to practice

Based on my own experience and understanding of the importance of service user involvement in social work education, I wanted to evaluate the Experts by Experience (EXEs) group based at the University of Derby in relation to an 'ideal type' of service user involvement based around the levels of citizen involvement first identified by Arnstein in 1969. As a lecturer I had unique access to the EXEs group and could attend the quarterly meetings as well as book service users for lectures, interviews and other participatory meetings which could benefit students' learning.

The perception outlined below is based on my own views and approach as a quasi-insider researcher. I carried out the work as part of my lecturer as researcher module within my post graduate certificate in higher education which I completed in July 2019.

The EXEs group within the University of Derby meets quarterly and is chaired by the deputy head of department (although there used to be a co-chair from the EXEs group).

- The membership consists mainly of carers, some of whom were related and appear to have been involved for some time, mostly carers, over retirement age, white and of a middle class background.
- There are no representatives from adults with learning difficulties who may require support to attend and possibly understand the 'wordy' agenda.
- There are representatives from mental health either as carers or people with a specific diagnosed condition for example, post-partum depression.
- There do not appear to be representatives of more marginalised groups for example, young people leaving care or homeless people.
- Digital literacy and access is often assumed by universities but needs to be addressed to ensure widening participation for example, one elderly carer representative was unable to access IT in order to book a place on a conference.
- There are terms of reference and payment is given at approximately £14 per hour for work undertaken although the process of claiming this seemed cumbersome with some members waiting several months for payment. Someone from the finance team was to be invited to the following meeting showing a willingness to listen to concerns and address issues via the formal meeting.

- Training is given and made available especially if service user or carer representatives are involved in staff or student recruitment.
- There appears to be more staff to service user representatives although some only stayed for a particular section of the meeting due to its 'fluid' and open membership so issues can be aired directly with those involved.

The value base is clearly one of respect for the contribution made by EXEs. A recent inspection had commended the input of the EXEs group as part of audit and external validation of the Health and Social Care Faculty. A decision was taken in January 2019 to add a new member to the group each academic year although there does not appear to be a process to do this which could further reinforce a self-perpetuating recruitment process; asking for representatives from established user groups as suggested above would be beneficial and more transparent. This is being proposed for the new EXEs group based in Chesterfield. The membership is going to be coordinated and serviced by an umbrella voluntary organisation. This could be further enhanced by introducing changes for example, co-chairing meetings in the future and the promotion of a service users' and carers' website (or at least a newsletter) edited by the EXEs themselves. A SWOT analysis encapsulates the current position of the EXEs group which appears to be operating on the 6th rung of Arnstein's ladder at the present time and is clearly a work in progress. Adopting suggestions from the ideal model above plus more would create a more inclusive situation, moving to the upper rungs of Arnstein's ladder.

Based on my findings, I distilled the information into a SWOT analysis, see Table 1.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>Established Committee – part of University structure.</p> <p>Meets regularly (Quarterly).</p> <p>Has Terms of Reference/formal agenda.</p> <p>Has administrative support & 3 hour slot with refreshments.</p> <p>‘Fluid’ membership which allows staff to join or attend when needed.</p> <p>Mutual respect & commitment to engage/listen.</p> <p>Participatory Approach.</p>	<p>Chaired by staff member.</p> <p>Payments for attendance not paid at moment.</p> <p>Expenses system – bureaucratic and long winded.</p> <p>I.T. focus can exclude participation (digital divide)</p> <p>Changes in admin. support / point of contact confusing.</p> <p>Ageing profile of existing EXEs.</p> <p>Not as inclusive e.g. lack of representation from BAME & disability or more marginal groups, e.g. young people in care.</p>
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p>Consider co-chair with an EXE.</p> <p>Explore IT inclusion (Twitter account?)</p> <p>Promote group via website & publicity.</p> <p>Mentor / buddying system for newer members as a new point of contact could enhance communication</p> <p>Pre-meeting for EXEs supported by admin. person using more accessible materials.</p> <p>Consider the idea of future new members coming from organisations which are user led (or heavily influenced).</p> <p>Develop appropriate training to ensure consistency of service delivery.</p>	<p>University may decide that EXEs group is no longer needed & create an alternative structure or cut support & funding.</p> <p>Changes in curriculum design may lead to less available work & functions for EXEs.</p> <p>Changes in SW education may lead to shorter SW courses.</p> <p>Apprenticeships and ‘grow your own’ LA courses may have less of a focus on service user involvement.</p> <p>Groups may lose funding.</p> <p>Representatives may leave, retire or die.</p> <p>In particular, LA dominated (in house) courses may not recognise the values & expertise of service users & carers.</p>

TABLE 1. SWOT Analysis of Experts by Experience Group, University of Derby.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined the essential ingredients of good practice in relation to service user involvement within social work education in terms of an ideal type based on recent literature in social work education and my own analysis based on a single case study of the EXEs group at the University of Derby using Arnstein's ladder. I have explored some of the main issues and possible barriers to change.

Cuts in funding during the Austerity era (2010-2020) as well as the unpredictable post-COVID 19 welfare sector may well result in a reduction in the number of service user led or heavily influenced organisations: it may diminish the opportunity for service users to engage in the future training of social work students. Also it is important to maintain the expected commitment to service user involvement within social work education and understanding its recent history is vital if the service user voice is not to become more tokenistic and literally fall down Arnstein's ladder!

Service user involvement and active engagement may be challenged by further changes in the future delivery of social work education, involving other providers for example, local authorities or indeed private agencies: the development of distance or shorter degree courses may be more of a threat to the future involvement of service users and carers than the power structures within universities themselves as the focus may shift back to the process driven managerialism identified by Rogowski (2011) rather than the partnership approach encouraged by the active involvement of service users and carers in the delivery of social work education as part of its essentially inclusive value base and a strengths based approach. It is necessary to guard against the notion of 'very nice but not necessary' in relation to service user inclusion otherwise they may well become exes - that is expendable or even extinct. A person-centred focus necessitates a value driven commitment to service user involvement and it is important to promote this at every level in order to embed, maintain and deliver the vital service user voice in social work education.

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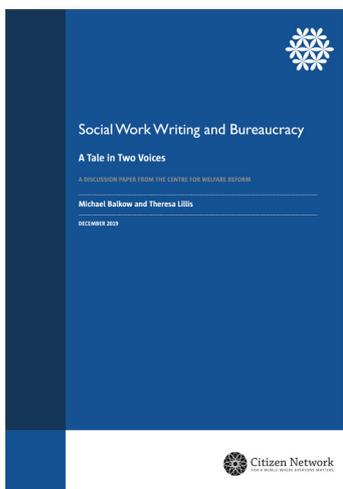
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Jackie King-Owen is a qualified social worker registered with Social Work England and is also an experienced housing practitioner with nearly 40 years working in the public, voluntary and not-for-profit third sector.

Jackie has over 25 years' experience in management as a leader of a large charitable organisation where, as CEO, she employed 650 staff to support 350 service users with learning difficulties. Jackie is a practice teacher for social work students and has helped to train 18 in the last 4 years. She was until recently a lecturer at the University of Derby and gained her Post Grad Certificate in Higher Education in 2019. Jackie is a member of the HE Academy and recently joined the Open University as a staff tutor (Social Work).

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