Evaluation of simulated social worker practice capability during Covid lockdown:

The Observed Structured Practice Assessment (OSPA)

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Abstract: This cross-University (South England) evaluation of innovative OSCE-style practice capability assessment was co-designed by people with experience, practitioners and educators. Our Observed Structured Practice Assessment (OSPA) simulated the Covid (and now hybrid) context of social work practice incorporating video conferencing online platforms to produce online initial safeguarding and wellbeing assessments. Eight volunteering postgraduate students watched a standardised interview alongside standardised telephone interviews with referral-makers and relevant professionals. 'Triads' of Expert Panel members rated the students' written 'Initial Assessment' of the person in their environment and 'Written Critical Reflection' exploring their judgement-making. The paper reports findings from the outcome measures: the rated feedback of the student work; the pre and post-OSPA questionnaires (students' knowledge, experience, confidence, demographics), and qualitative student interviews of the different OSPA activities.

Keywords: simulation; OSCE; initial assessment; practice capability assessment

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Introduction

In the context and aftermath of the Covid 19 pandemic 'lockdown' in England, 'real-life social work practice' has increasingly incorporated video conferencing online platforms to interview individuals, family members and professionals to produce online initial safeguarding and wellbeing assessments. This paper reports a cross-University evaluation of a method of practice capability assessment - the Observed Structured Practice Assessmen ('OSPA') – that mirrored the format of Observed Structured Clinical Examinations ('OSCEs') from medical education in providing structured, standardised activities, but our focus was to simulate the current realistic social work practice experience of online initial assessment activity (using the aforementioned video conferencing online platforms). We had a pragmatic rationale – we had a group of Masters in Social Work students whose first assessed field placements had been shortened by the Covid pandemic. Also, we had political impetus, with guidance from the English national regulator for social work encouraging 'flexibility of requirements and standards to adapt placements and student experiences to meet learning outcomes', with students given opportunity 'to put their learning into practice in real-life situations to build skills and confidence for the role', and assessments under development 'being co-produced with people with lived experience' and practitioners (Standard 6.1, SW England, 2021). There is appetite for innovation and collaborative development of rigorous assessments that meet employability demands for preparation for 'real-life' frontline practice. Health Education England's (NHS HEE, 2020) national strategic vision for simulation technologies calls for more simulation-based activities to address system-wide challenges, including the shortfall of field placement learning opportunities. This paper evaluates whether the structured activity provided by our OSPA provided 'realistic' assessed practice experience. The paper begins by situating the project within the context to using simulation to assess practice capability in virtual learning environments. Detail is then provided of the co-production of the OSPA with people with lived experience, practitioners, and educators, and summarises the evaluation methodology. Findings from the pre and post OSPA measures are provided, followed by themes from the semi-structured interviews with the participating students. The paper ends with a discussion of the findings and indicates what parts of the OSPA we are keeping and changing in future use.

Context

Scoping reviews of the use of simulation to not just teach but assess practice capability of qualifying social work students shows growing interest but little published research (Logie *et al.,* 2013), particularly in the UK (Ruch, 2015). A related first issue is that there can be definitional variations with 'what is simulation' in virtual learning. We drew on Gaba's definition:

> Simulation is a technique – not a technology – to replace or amplify real experiences with guided experiences that evoke or replicate substantial aspects of the real world in a fully interactive manner.…'in-situ simulation' describes activities deliberately designed to provide a realistic environment to physically rehearse tasks and mentalise thoughts and feelings arising at the time. (Gaba, 2004 as cited by NHS HEE, 2020, p. 4).

A second issue is that practice competency models vary among countries and specialisations (Bogo, 2010). Notwithstanding this caution, our approach utilised the body of research resources developed by Bogo and colleagues in Canada (2010, 2012, 2015). Their work provided the basis for the simulation for the recently evaluated Frontline social work programme (Maxwell *et al.,* 2016), as well as the recent Tortorelli *et al.,* (2021) and Kourgiantakis and Lee (2020) Canadian-based simulation-based responses to the challenges of providing field placement during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Canadian context shares some similarities with UK social work by mainly teaching and assessing practice competence during placement to integrate theory-into-practice learning. Moving away from the behavioural checklist approach of 'observed demonstrated skills', the Canadian studies emphasise entwined integration of 'procedural competencies' constituting skills and techniques (interviewing, communicating using verbal and written methods, conducting assessments) along with 'meta-competencies' constituting interpersonal and cognitive dimensions to facilitate engagement (critical thinking, self-awareness and self-reflection) (Kourgiantakis *et al.,* 2020). The pedagogy underpinning England's Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) similarly moved from a behavioural checklist approach to emphasise increasing developmental capability to deal with complex situations of increasing risk/uncertainty, and holistic demonstration of interdependent 'domains' of professional capacity (BASW 2018). In this holism of 'developmental capability', the UK pedagogy reflects the premise of the Canadian holistic model of 'competence' in emphasizing 'the link between the cognitive processes involved in conceptualizing practice, the

subjective experience of the practitioner, and the performance of skillful behavior. (Bogo *et al.,* 2012, p.429)

A third issue is whether simulation activities can contribute to the challenge of finding reliable, valid and fair assessment tools to assess such developing holistic practice capability (Bogo *et al.,* 2012). Current practice in England is for field instructors – 'practice educators' – to formulate a pass or fail 'professional judgement' of the placement, holistically arrived at by drawing on a range of differing assessment methods. While practice panels provide varying degrees of moderation to counter the subjective judgement of individual practice educators, there can be variable levels of specificity to the assessment criteria used (the PCF domains), variations in the sufficiency of differing types and sources of evidence drawn upon to support the adjudication, and occasionally a leniency bias arising from the student-Practice Educator relationship dynamics (Finch, 2017). Simulation activities could offer some standardisation contributing to fairness or rigor in assessment of practice capability/competence, particularly alongside other assessment methods.

Fourth, the structured, standardised activities in simulation could contribute rigor by augmenting not just the assessment, but the practice learning experience itself. The developmental holism model of capability/competence warrants students having sufficient practical experiential opportunities to develop ('meta competencies' of) reflective practice activity and critical thinking skills necessary for linking theory to practice within the ('procedural competency') challenges of initial safeguarding assessment (Staempfli *et al.,* 2015). Certainly, the Narey Review (2014) questioned whether some student placements provided sufficient practical experience in instrumental statutory social work tasks, though one must be mindful of the 'frontline ready-to-go tension' - ostensibly prioritising 'procedural competencies' over students' needs for simultaneous development of 'meta competencies' to meet ongoing challenges of complex, relational working.

Of the few studies of online social work practice learning and assessment, caution is expressed about how teaching about the use of self and the therapeutic alliance is less effective virtually than traditional face-to-face methods, and that simulation does not create the embodied practice tension experienced within real-life family homes (Kourgiantakis and Lee, 2020). However, a typical practice situation within lockdown (and its aftermath of 'hybrid working') has been one of digitally-based interviews and online written assessments, such that practice tension now additionally arises within the digital environment, and perhaps also

with the additional pressure to 'get assessment judgements right' even without always being able to go into people's homes. A second caution arises from claims that simulated practice assessment can cause student anxiety over potential knowledge gaps, unaccustomedness with simulation processes, or unfamiliarity with the exact practice situation (Al-Ghareeb *et al.,* 2017). Students who find theory-into-practice challenging, achieve less well with elearning (Ruch 2015). Yet, social work processes of initial assessment require engagement with unfamiliar situations and emotional intelligence and containment of such anxieties. Thus, the simulation activity could provide crucial rehearsal and reflective learning about such meta-competencies alongside the procedural competencies.

The OSPA

Our research question was: Can our online OSPA simulation deliver sufficiently realistic experiential practice learning of social work practice ('initial assessment') online to assess demonstrated meta-competencies and procedural competencies (as holistically encompassed by the relevant PCF domains)?

> *Credibility* is a specific type of validity—also called *face validity*—that refers to how many stakeholders from different groups (e.g., teachers, administrators, and policymakers) view the measure as reasonable and appropriate and support its use…Having the participation of teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders may increase the validity of the instruments and processes involved in measuring effectiveness. (Little *et al.,* 2009, p.23)

The simulation methods (filmed video and telephone interviews) were developed with a group of volunteer local social work practitioners alongside a group of people with lived experience recruited from the University's 'persons with experience' consultative group. This 'expert panel' met to ensure the OSPA's validity ('credibility') in representing the reality of the complex interpersonal and relational demands of the person-in-situational context, and in simulating the real demands of social work processes in producing online initial assessments (with complexity in analysis) within required timescales. Breakout groups of equally weighted practitioners, persons with experience, and educators co-produced scripts

of typical real-life person-in-situation issues to prompt student thinking about the kinds of practice concerns requiring their attention. Professional actors were filmed by a professional television production company to further the realistic practice conditions. Another 'expert panel' of equally weighted practitioners, persons with experience, and educators agreed criteria ('measures') for rating the student's capability/competence. For this, we mimicked the Frontline evaluation in drawing upon the validated measures developed by Bogo and colleagues (2010; 2012) for meta-competencies and procedural competencies. The author mapped the Bogo *et al.* criteria onto the Professional Capabilities Framework, tweaking the language to translate to our local context, and filtering out those criteria that did not concern the range of capabilities which could be assessed via our OSPA. Second, each member of the expert panel voiced their ranking of the suitability of each of the criteria. The criteria were then formatted into a rating questionnaire as scaled items. Each scaled item was given a few sentences of description to enable practitioner-educator-person with experience 'triads' to meaningfully use those criteria/items to rate/mark the student work and provide feedback to students.

The OSPA experience constituted six days of experiential practice learning and assessment. Two pre-OSPA days of preparation engaged students in watching video pre-recordings of practitioner and service user perspectives of 'what makes a good initial assessment', and educators' video summaries of how different academic modular leaning contributed to understanding initial assessment processes. Relevant 'practice literature' about initial assessment was provided in the final preparation afternoon, drawing on websites such as the Social Care Institute for Excellence and Community Care Inform. On Day Three the students watched one standardised video of a social worker-with-service-user interview and listened to standardised telephone calls with the referrer and the family member. They then immediately wrote their Initial Assessment and electronically submitted it to Turnitin software. Turnitin was used as it offered a convenient way to electronically submit and rate/grade assignments, as well as offering text-matching software that compares a student's submission to text located elsewhere (student papers, internet documents, journals). After this, students were given prompt questions and 2.5 days of independent study time to complete their Written Critical Reflections, using the material from the pre-OSPA days, to evaluate their own Initial Assessment work. On Day Six, the students engaged in a learning activity giving peer-feedback to each other's Initial Assessments, during which time the Expert Panel

triads met to rate/mark their work. The students received their feedback and wrote an A4 page on their experiential learning to submit to their own Practice Educator, and which they could choose to constitute as evidence of practice capability for their placement portfolio. At the end of each day, the HEI educators provided an hour 'drop-in' to support the students through the process.

Evaluation method

Outcome measures included the rated student OSPA work (the 'Initial Assessments' and 'Written Critical Reflections') as well as student perception data, collected by questionnaire at baseline (pre-OSPA preparation (T1)) and post-Written Critical Reflection (T2). The questionnaire was based upon the Participant Perception Indicator (PPI) Questionnaire that has been used to evaluate healthcare students' perceptions of simulation, including within the context of internet-based learning (Lee and Tsai 2011). Our questionnaire contained eleven learning items, with each item consisting of three attributes: formal knowledge ('capability'); experience ('experientially-gained knowledge'); confidence ('self-efficacy'). Each attribute was scaled 1–5, where 1 indicated 'I have none' to 5 which indicated 'I have a great deal of…' The questionnaire at T1 and T2 also contained sociodemographic items in recognition that there are attainment gaps for students across diversity characteristics of race and ethnicity, disability, age, socio-economic background, and caring responsibilities (Bernard *et al.,* 2011). A third evaluative dimension, nested within the evaluation design, constituted a semi structured interview conducted by the author and co-researcher with all eight participating students about their experiences of the OSPA, and their detailed perceptions on their learning from it, including which aspects were more useful than others. The interviews were conducted and recorded on video conferencing software and transcribed in their entirety. Thematic qualitative analysis was used to inductively identify themes from across the interview data, with the researchers cross-checking each other's analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Descriptive statistics (mean and median) were used to describe the differences in student scores for the pre-and post OSPA questionnaire items. Full ethical approval was granted by the University of Kent (Ref: 0446, 28.5.2021).

Participants

Eight volunteering Masters in Social Work students completed the OSPA, of whom seven self-identified as female, one as male, and six self-identified as Black African, one as Black British, and one as White British. Ages ranged across the group: 22-24 (n=1), 25-29 (n=2), 30-39 (n=1), 40-49 (n=2) and one student declined disclosure. The demographic data showed this to be a group of mainly mature students with some social disadvantages and challenges: 50% had caring responsibilities, 38% received income raising benefits for someone in their household, and 50% had engaged in paid employment during the past twelve months. The students had considerable experience in working with disadvantaged people and addressing human rights but little knowledge of the UK practice context (exacerbated by the Covid pandemic).

Findings

Rated student work

The raters/markers wanted more in the Initial Assessments and Written Reflections of integration of theory from the students' academic learning, more attention to the differing needs of all the different service users in the scenario – children and adults – not just taking the perspective of one or the other, more volume of work, more care with written presentation, and more awareness of non-judgemental language. While the feedback was balanced, the comments were harsher than we had previously found when people with experience and practitioners were involved in the teaching of social work students at this first stage.

Student perception data: Pre and post questionnaires

Table 1: Mean scores of student perception pre-OSPA and post-OSPA			
Items	Mean scores of scaled attributes		
'I know/have experience of/ feel confident about….'	Formal knowledge ('capability')	Experiential knowledge	Confidence
who to include and focus on	*Pre* 2.88	2.25	3.14
	Post 4.13	3.25	4.25
what my role is	*Pre* 3	2.25	2.62
	Post 4.13	3.88	4
what information I need to gather	*Pre* 2.38	2	2.5
	Post 4.13	3.57	4.57
what the key components of an initial assessment covers	*Pre* 2.25	2	2.43
	Post 4	3.25	4.38
what are the purposes of an initial assessment	*Pre* 2.88	2.14	2.5
	Post 4.13	3.38	4.25
what knowledge from my learning I could use	*Pre* 2.88	3	3.14
	Post 4	3.13	4.25
how to promote collaboration with the person	*Pre* 3.5	3.38	3.25
	Post 4.13	3.5	4.38
how to show concern for human rights and social justice	*Pre* 3.25	3.6	3.25
	Post 3.75	2.88	4
what to do after I have gathered information	*Pre* 2.25	2.57	2.29
	Post 3.5	2.71	4.29
feel able to consider the impact of self during initial assessment	*Pre* 3.38	3.12	3.43
	Post 4.25	3.57	4.71
know my own strengths and limitations about initial assessment	*Pre* 2.75	2.29	2.57
	Post 4	2.57	4.43

The picture of student perceptions of their learning was quite opposite. The pre and post OSPA student perception questionnaire data showed the students giving increased scores from the pre-OSPA (T1 baseline) to the post OSPA (T2) for all the items in relation to student perception of their formal

knowledge ('capability') and their confidence in undertaking the processes of initial Assessment (Table 1). The student scores of their formal knowledge ('capability') and their confidence at pre-OSPA (T1 baseline) indicated that the students felt that they had only 'a little' to 'some' knowledge of purposes/processes in initial assessment, and 'a little' to 'some' confidence about their self-efficacy in completing it. However, at T2 (post-OSPA), those scores showed an increase indicating that they now had 'some' to 'quite good' knowledge and 'some' to 'quite good' confidence. The biggest changes were: 'I know/am confident in…: 'what information I need to gather', 'what the key components of an initial assessment covers', 'what are the purposes of an initial assessment', 'what knowledge from my learning I could use', and 'my own strengths and limitations about initial assessment'.

There was a little variation in students' perception of their *experientially gained* knowledge of undertaking Initial Assessment from pre-OSPA (T1) to post-OSPA (T2). Students gave lower scores for 'I have experience of showing a concern for human rights, social justice, inclusion and equality' in the post-OSPA (to the pre-OSPA) and almost no change in scores from pre to post OSPA for 'I have experience of how to promote collaboration with the service user'. These were interesting 'dips' in score because the students had scored both of those items above the midpoint in the pre-OSPA questionnaire.

Student perception data: Themes from qualitative interviews

It really felt like practice learning

Overall, there was a very positive response with all participating students commenting on their initial trepidation but then excitement at engaging in 'a whole different learning experience' (Student 8). They differentiated the OSPA from academic learning, saying that it was *practice learning* that they had experienced. All the students said that the OSPA scenario presented a realism leading to an appreciation of the pressure of responsibility in the role of assessing safeguarding. Student 7 valued such insight about experientially being 'in the moment' absorbing the different sources of information, and managing the weight of responsibility:

> *… where you got the telephone calls as well as hearing different peoples' sides of it from different family members, as you would in normal practice… so I felt that sort*

of, the pressure of the responsibility that you've got to make sure that you've captured everything important to them - all the safeguarding issues, anything that may have been there that you should have picked up on or that wasn't said…. (Student 7)

Some students drew parallels from the OSPA learning experience with their placement learning. For example, Student 2 pointed to the equivalence of some professional practice behaviours:

It felt like practice learning because the outcome is the same… We did a lot of written work. We did a lot of reading. We did a lot of interaction. We did a lot of professionalism, time management, all those outcomes that we're striving to achieve or to meet me in placements are being met as well. (Student 2)

All commented on how they consider the OSPA to have been useful in preparation for their next placement.

Students saw the application of theory to practice

All students stated that the experience built on and/or consolidated placement learning about theory-use-in-practice to date. Many students identified how the OSPA scenario helped them to understand the relevance of their previous teaching:

With the OSPA I used The Children Act, Care Act, the Mental Capacity Act, lots of others. I would see myself explaining, not in a very mechanical way, but trying to link these things, like pointing to indicators of legislation that should advise me on my assessment basically. So I was wondering, is [grandmother] in need of care and support? Is she able to manage her daily activities? She's an adult but I was also thinking about her grandson. He has a disability, so should it be the Care Act and The Children Act? (Student 2)

All the students perceived an increase in their communication skills in relation to developing listening skills and observing non-verbal communication.

So it helped me that bit more when thinking about communication skills. And you know what you can pick up when you're with someone - body language and stuff like that. How you can interpret that and how you formulate hypotheses when you're doing it in assessment. So, it was very helpful in that regard, yeah. (Student 1)

The OSPA seemed to give students a greater understanding of the assessment process itself. This went beyond the procedural competencies of 'form-filling' to engaging cognitive meta-competencies of critically understanding why and how information pieces can build a picture. Student 7 spoke about how her learning from the OSPA differed from simply learning how to fill in a structured initial assessment form because it forced the student to process her thinking behind her increasing understanding of the person-in-situation:

> *The process of an assessment and your thought process was really helpful…I was watching the lady and watching her body language and thinking about how it was making me feel and all of those kind of things at the same time as opposed to 'that piece of information she's just given me what column am I going to put that in on [name of local authority's] form?' So, yeah, I found it really useful. (Student 7)*

Reflection and management of self

The OSPA promoted students' appreciation of how to connect with their own feelings and how to manage boundaries.

> *I sort of thought about my feelings and how I could then use those to understand what I was hearing and how I could interpret it within the assessment… So the OSPA gave me the opportunity to sort of put into practice listening to the service user, listening to my own thoughts and my own feelings about what they were saying. (Student 1)*

> *I have to be really mindful I think 'cause I'm quite an emotive person really, especially I find when it's like relatable to somebody in your family. So I was instantly, when she was looking all nervous, a bit agitated and I'm instantly thinking of my own nan. You know that kind of thing. Then you have to, I have to be really mindful yeah about that side of things. (Student 7)*

The whole group drop-in sessions with the educators at the end of each day were seen as valuable reflective discursive spaces. Here, the educators' reflective questioning about what thoughts and feelings had been raised by their learning each day and why, helped the students build confidence in their developing understanding of 'processes of assessment'. They likened the drop-in sessions to professional supervision.

Online delivery method as a learning resource

All the students saw that it promoted an appreciation of the importance of feedback as a learning event. This occurred even though the feedback from the triads of raters/markers was rather blunt and lower in score. Key to the student acceptance of feedback was that it was balanced (identifying areas of strength and development) and that it was consistent across the three members of each triad (practitioner, person-with-lived-experience, educator):

> *Yeah I was not upset at all. I really appreciated it. And when I kind of placed all those things side-by-side, the tutors, the service user notes, the practitioner, yeah, I realised that there is a kind of alignment between the three of them that gives me an assurance that where they said I have to improve it, where they said I have '1' definitely that means I didn't do it as expected so I should learn from that and then find a means of improving on it. It was a clear picture of who I am, and where I have gotten to with my learning. (Student 4)*

Some felt that the online learning led to greater flexibility. It enabled them to access the variety of teaching methods across the OSPA period, not just the video scenario and telephone material, and many said that they returned to the early pre-OSPA material when writing their written reflections. Herein, all of the students found the person-with-lived-experience videoed perspectives of 'what makes a good initial assessment' particularly useful, though some wished that they had used this insight more in their actual initial assessment and written reflection.

> *I really found the service user ones the most useful, not that the others weren't, listening to their perspective on it… like being spoken 'about' and maybe 'to' instead of 'with'. I found that really insightful…I think I was trying to be a bit more mindful…but it was mentioned [in the feedback] that I hadn't given enough, uhm, I don't know if it's credit or thought or weight towards that side of things. Although I had taken that in from the videos and it had influenced my thought process, I don't think I conveyed that as much as I should have in the written element. (Student 7)*

Discussion

The data revealed how there is often more practice learning achieved than might be captured on a written assignment. Perhaps this showed a drawback to the online learning process, that by its structured, written nature, students wished that they had articulated more of their thought processes onto paper than they actually did. There was also the view that the OSPA, in being focused on a one-off practice opportunity (one initial assessment), did not give the opportunity for students to follow up on the feedback provided to them and develop their initial assessment competencies. On placement, they would have some chance of re-engaging with an individual, develop their working relationship, and have another chance to gain feedback and demonstrate progression.

Perhaps in light of this group of students' lack of UK practice experience, it was little wonder that the products of their Initial Assessment were not rated highly by the 'triads' of practitioners, people with experience, and tutors. We wondered if the simulation created an absence of a prior working relationship with the students, and this had created a degree of relational detachment. Hence, there may have been less empathy with the students' development as learners, and for some, less recognition that this might be the first time that a student had undertaken the experience of conducting an Initial Assessment. We also wondered if the raters/markers were identifying with the actors in the scenario. They had seen the video scenario and listened to the telephone audio calls just prior to rating the student work, so maybe the reality of the simulation was having an effect upon them, and not just the students! It was important to recognise that each Panel Member potentially brought their cultural and personal bias that should be disconnected from student performances (if there is sufficient self-awareness) and that inter-rater reliability is often precarious (Lu *et al.,* 2011). Higher validity and reliability would be achieved with a larger number of scenarios and raters, not just a single scenario design that we had here, even with the care taken in its co-produced design to increase face validity and limit rater bias by incorporating the 'triads'.

Nevertheless, the OSPA appeared to provide practice learning opportunities that stimulated the social work students to attune themselves to reflective and emotional dynamics of practice (Ingram, 2015). The simulation 'credibly' recreated the professional conditions of initial assessment whereby emotions were triggered by entering worlds of distress, trauma, risk, vulnerability. The students experienced their

own vulnerability and uncertainty as they absorbed and weighed the different filmed perspectives of the family members and professionals. Such encouragement of cognitive and interpersonal meta-competencies - in real time interaction – showed promise in offering something additional to existing practice capability methods that sometimes prioritise students' production of technical work products over students' deep learning of 'subtle interactional, dynamic and contextual elements of the client-social worker relationship process' (Lu *et al.,* 2011).

Qualities and behaviours valued by people-with-lived-experience within the social worker's professional role (compassionate, friendly, listening, promoting independence and resilience) were integrated within the OSPA's differing learning activities and the qualitative interview data showed that the students did pick up on them. Tanner (2020, p. 1700) emphasises that 'in order to 'feel' compassion 'for' service users, social workers need to have opportunities to connect with them emotionally'. Interestingly, such emotional connection occurred even though this was a standardised filmed simulation through an online delivery platform, and the students were not even communicating directly with the actors! Hay (2017, p.5) notes 'the act of sitting with and connecting with a client on an emotional level during a distressing time…to be a powerful intervention in itself'. Potentially, the simulation task promoted such ethic of care meta-competencies whereby 'just being there' and 'feeling with' can convey emotional understanding verbally and non-verbally.

We wondered why some students did not then integrate the service user voice, emotions and knowledge into the procedural aspect of their work products (the Initial Assessment). Did they think that it was not professionally legitimate to write about 'voiced feelings' and 'theory'? Such discrepancies reflect a not uncommon gap between students' self-report of their knowledge and then expressing how that knowledge relates to a situation concisely on paper (Lu *et al.,* 2011). Written communication methods need to be given more attention in social work practice teaching (Healey and Drayton, 2021). On the other hand, the discrepancies reflect the wider context of tension within notions of professionalism. The impact of neoliberalism has been to advance technical-rationalist approaches to defensively 'manage' the complexities and uncertainties of social work practice, particularly its emotional and relational dimensions (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). This creates a tension for social work students seeking to make the person's lived experience voiced and visible, for 'not only are practice approaches rational and objective, but also service users

are constructed in those terms too' (Tanner, 2020, p.1692). Arguably such procedural competencies will be increased by more rehearsal opportunities in simulated tasks, accompanied by feedback. This seemed to be confirmed by the pre and post OSPA questionnaire data, where knowledge and confidence scores substantially increased out of the learning experience.

When we created the OSPA, we anticipated that anxiety might arise from the nature of it being online and that this might create obstacles to learning. We formulated the daily drop-in support (by the educators) to provide some supportive scaffolding. The drop-ins turned out to be a crucial mechanism to share student feelings and vulnerabilities arising from the emotional triggering to the material and 'felt responsibility' for conducting the assessment. The mechanism offered the kind of 'psychological safety' of emotion-focused supervision and peer support that motivates care and compassion (Tanner, 2020).

Conclusion

The evaluation merits keeping the OSPA, particularly given the overwhelming positivity of student response to the experiential learning. One change that we are making is to move it into the Readiness for Direct Work period to ensure that *all students* have experience of Initial Assessment processes before they go out on placement. Another change is that we will seek more qualitative feedback from the triads of assessors. The structured 'rated feedback forms' encouraged a more harsh, detached feedback style that we believe impacted upon the student perception of their experiential knowledge. On the one hand this was not necessarily a bad thing as the students had to 'take in' that their approaches needed more development. On the other hand, there was need for the raters/markers to recognise that this was a beginning experience of initial assessment, and to promote *developmental* capacity.

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