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Action replay role-play: promoting social work students' communication skills through video enhanced reflective practice

Anne Kelly ^a, Sarah Brown ^a, Andrea Honess ^b, Michelle McCaffrey ^c, Thomas Parkinson ^d and Eleni Skoura-Kirk ^a

^aSchool of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, Division for the Study of Law, Society and Social Justice, University of Kent, Kent, UK; ^bSchool of Education and Life Long Learning, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK; ^cPsychology Interacts Ltd, Kent, UK; ^dCentre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, UK

ABSTRACT

This article evaluates a collaboration between social work academics and educational psychologists using Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP) to support the development of social work students' communication and interpersonal skills. VERP is a strengths-based model of reflective practice and professional development that involves a specific method of video reflection to enhance individuals' capacity for 'attuned interactions'. An adapted model of VERP was implemented with first year UK-based undergraduate social work students during a 'Readiness for Direct Practice' module. The project was evaluated with a focus on eliciting the views of the students on how using the approach had affected their development of communication skills. The findings, based on a qualitative analysis of students' self-reflection forms and a focus group, indicate the potential of this model for developing students' awareness of the micro-skills involved in sensitive, attuned interactions, and building their confidence and sense of agency in using these skills. Potential benefits and limitations of using VERP in social work education and practice are discussed.


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Engagement in reflective practice is established as a key element of professional development across many fields, and in professional training it has become a mechanism for facilitating the development of communication and interpersonal skills (Karnieli-Miller, 2020). Social work, health and education students are commonly guided to develop competence in reflective practice through the use of various frameworks and methodologies, including learning diaries and logs often structured around experiential learning models such as Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) and Gibbs' reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988). Social work programmes in particular tend to include a strong focus on reflective learning; however, there is limited research into how social workers actually reflect in practice (Ferguson, 2018). Barriers to reflection

CONTACT Anne Kelly  A.Kelly@kent.ac.uk

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in practice have been identified in social work literature: reflective practice may be inhibited by individuals' lack of reflective skills and self-awareness, or low confidence and fear of scrutiny (Thompson & Thompson, 2008), and is also impacted upon by factors such as the demands of face-to-face work, the complexity of practice situations, practitioners' need to defend themselves from overwhelming anxiety, and the level of organizational support and emotional containment available (Ferguson, 2018; Ruch, 2007). Demands for certainty and speed may also deter practitioners from staying with the discomfort of complexity and uncertainty (Taylor & White, 2006). In social work education reflective practice might also be undermined by a tension between supporting students' reflection and the assessment of competences and outcomes (Lam et al., 2007).

Reflection and reflective practice are not only key processes in skill development (Beesley et al., 2018), but are central to the development of the particular communication skills involved in building positive working relationships (Ingram et al., 2014). The importance of responsive, empathetic communication in social work practice has been underlined by studies of interactions of child protection social workers which indicate the effect that low levels of empathy can have on parental engagement (Forrester et al., 2008; Lynch et al., 2019). Koprowska (2007, p. 132) argues that communication skills are at the heart of social work, and that 'failing to be emotionally responsive blocks communication, generates partial information and increases the risk of poor decision-making'. During interactions social workers need to have a reflective awareness of their own verbal, non-verbal and emotional responses, to be able to adapt and change direction when needed. The ability to recognize and respond to non-verbal cues is key, and with awareness, habits can be changed (Koprowska, 2007). The development of such skills is therefore important in the pre-qualifying curriculum, even from an early point. For example, the Professional Capabilities Framework for all levels of social work in England includes a requirement for students to 'demonstrate core communication skills and the capacity to develop them further' at the Readiness for Direct Practice stage (BASW, 2018).

This article explores the potential of a specific facilitated strengths-based and relationship-based video intervention—Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP)—to support the development of social work learners' interpersonal skills and reflective competence, facilitating engagement in reflective practice at an early stage of the programme, and aiming in part to address some of the identified barriers to reflection that may be experienced.

VERP is derived from Video Interaction Guidance (VIG), a National Institute for Healthcare Excellence (NICE) recommended evidence-based intervention for enhancing communication within relationships. VIG works through 'actively engaging clients in a process of change towards better relationships with others who are important to them' (Kennedy, 2011, p. 21). VIG is typically used to improve the relationship between an adult (commonly a parent/carer or individual professional) and a child, and is a short-term video feedback intervention facilitated by a trained guider. When VIG methods are used by professionals to reflect on their communication with individuals and families, this is referred to as Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP), a 'method of professional development that focuses on enhancing attuned interactions through a specific way of using video reflection' (Kennedy &

Landor 2015, p.18–19). VERP is a strengths-based approach in which individuals set their own goals and ‘are helped to identify and build on their present skills’ (Landor, 2015, p. 60).

VERP is increasingly being used in educational psychology training courses, and studies with trainee educational psychologists indicate its benefits as a method for supporting professional reflection, self-awareness and skills development (Murray & Leadbetter, 2018; Pitt & Soni, 2018; Sancho et al., 2015).

Although some limited use of VERP in social work practice has been documented, for example in developing the communication skills of newly qualified social workers in child protection social work (Sen et al., 2015), to date we have found no documented evidence of the use of VERP as a specific method in pre-qualifying social work education. However, video-based experiential learning methods are commonly used in social work programmes in the teaching and learning of communication skills. Typically, these methods involve role-play (for example with students videoing themselves and each other), and incorporate groupwork and feedback (Dinham, 2006); they may involve the use of skills labs (Moss et al., 2007, 2010); and may also be used in summative assessment of social work students’ communication skills (Cartney, 2006). In some instances, the role-plays are led by people with lived experience, though these do not always include the use of video (Hitchin, 2016; Moss et al., 2010; Skilton, 2011; Skoura-Kirk et al., 2021).

None of these examples of role-play and video methods have incorporated all the principles and methods of VERP. However, studies have identified various benefits for social work students of using role-play and video: as a way of preparing for practice (Moss et al., 2010); leading to increased confidence, skills, reflective practice and self-efficacy (Bolger, 2014); and as a means for self-observation and self-feedback, also leading to enhanced self-awareness and critical reflection (Thompsett et al., 2017). Gillingham (2008) also found students highly valued their interactions with group members and staff.

Several theoretical models underpin the processes of VIG and VERP. These fall into three key areas: first, those that apply to the *video* element of the intervention, relating to theories of change involving ‘self-modelling’ and the methods of video feedback; second, those that relate to the *interaction and guidance* process including ‘theories of intersubjectivity and mediated learning’; and finally those that relate to *empowerment*, including ‘theories of change that emphasise respect, empowerment and collaboration’ (Cross & Kennedy, 2011, p. 58). Key among these are the foundational theories that underpinned the initial development of the intervention, primarily Colwyn Trevarthen’s Theory of Intersubjectivity (Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001), focusing on the capacity for subject-to-subject emotional engagement in interactions between people, and drawing from his observations of the dance-like nature of sensitive and attuned mother-baby interactions (Cross & Kennedy, 2011). Also significant is Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) with its emphasis on role modeling, as in VERP the students will see themselves on video ‘self-modelling’ good examples of skills; it also places importance on self-efficacy beliefs which affect individuals’ willingness to attempt tasks (Cross & Kennedy, 2011). Attachment Theory is also influential, and intersubjectivity is an important element in this, as sensitive caregiving involves the carer’s attunement and responsiveness to the infant’s internal mental states, enabling the regulation of emotions (Howe, 2005).

It is from Trevarthen's view of intersubjectivity that the 'principles of attuned interactions', used in the VIG and VERP processes, are derived (Cross & Kennedy, 2011). These principles are: *being attentive*, *encouraging initiatives*, *receiving initiatives*, *developing attuned interactions*, *guiding*, and *deepening discussion*. For each of these, associated behaviors are listed. For example, *being attentive* includes 'looking interested', 'turning towards' and 'friendly intonation and posture', and *receiving initiatives* includes 'showing that you have heard, noticed the other's initiative', and 'using the other's words or phrases', among other responses (Kennedy & Landor 2015, pp.22–23). Further details of the values underpinning VIG and VERP and the full table of 'principles of attuned interactions' and associated behaviors may be found in Kennedy & Landor (2015).

During a typical VERP intervention, participants first attend two focused sessions of VERP training. Here, the theoretical underpinnings and method are explained, and participants receive support to identify individual learning goals. They then take a short film of themselves in practice, and spend time individually identifying clips of film which show themselves as *better than usual* in relation to their learning goals and the principles of attuned interaction. Participants bring these clips to small reflective groups, facilitated by a trained and accredited VERP guider, where they are supported to use the video to micro-analyze key moments in their own and others' practice, looking for themselves showing examples of attuned communication skills and exploring, moment by moment, the impact of these on the interaction (Kennedy & Landor 2015). It is important to note that, unlike some video-based methods, the focus is on strengths-based clips selected on the basis of exceptions to the usual pattern of interaction, linked to participants' goals. Two to five 'shared review' sessions are generally recommended to ensure sustained development. The VERP model also requires guiders to engage in reflection on their own professional skills development and interactions with learners, through peer supervision involving shared reflection on videos of their own practice as guiders (Landor, 2015).

Landor (2015) argues that the strengths-based nature of VIG and VERP is a chief factor in their success. In VERP, practitioners take ownership of their own development and are encouraged to identify their own agency in interactions and the impact of change in their relationships (Kennedy & Landor 2015). Focusing on moments that are going well helps reduce practitioner anxiety and fears of humiliation, raises confidence and self-efficacy, and creates an atmosphere that encourages self-reflection and balanced feedback (Cave et al., 2011). VIG and VERP are based on a view that showing people videos of themselves failing in problem situations is not conducive to change; however, the strengths-based orientation does not preclude opportunities to discuss more difficult moments and emotions. It is also important for the group facilitator to model attuned interactions and build participants' feelings of security, supporting their readiness to think about complex or challenging issues, and to 'mentalise' ('think about thinking' and be reflectively attuned to their own and others' mental states), also harnessing the power of group learning (Landor, 2015, p. 69).

Using strengths-based video analysis: design and implementation

For the present study, four social work lecturers who were undertaking training as VIG practitioners, and two educational psychologists who were accredited VIG supervisors,

collaborated to incorporate an adapted VERP intervention into an existing Readiness for Direct Practice (RfDP) module with first year social work undergraduates. This module spans the academic year (September to May), and draws on both theoretical and practice-based/experiential learning to ensure that students are 'ready' for their first practice learning placement in year 2 of the programme. Role-plays led by people with lived experience were already included within this module and have been evaluated in a previous study (Skoura-Kirk et al., 2021). The role-plays took place twice during the module, in December and March, and were led by people with lived experience who are members of the social work Partnership Initiative (PI) group at the University of Kent. Each PI member created a scenario for an initial meeting with individual students and a follow-up discussion three months later.

The scenarios were made available to the students at least a week in advance to enable them to prepare for the 15-minute role-plays. These were recorded in university offices using video cameras, with no lecturer present. The video recordings were then emailed to each individual student via WeTransfer (where files are encrypted within transfer and can only be accessed using unique links sent to sender and recipient). Students were invited to watch the video in their own time and select a short exchange (2–3 minutes) they were pleased with, involving better than usual moments of attuned interaction. A week later the students met in reflective discussion groups of four, lasting 60–75 minutes, facilitated by the social work lecturers and the educational psychologists. Each student was given time to show their chosen clip(s) to the group and identify examples of attuned interactions. The facilitator would encourage the student (before opening it up to other group members) to identify what the student had done to contribute to this interaction—at times inviting repeated showing of small extracts to identify the micro-skills involved—with the emphasis on enabling students to recognize for themselves their use of attuned interactions and the positive impact of these on the PI member and relationship.

The key adaptation made to the VERP model was to allow reflective groups to be facilitated by social work lecturers who were in an earlier stage of their VIG training than would normally be the case in the VERP process. The team decided that this approach was warranted for the purposes of this pilot as the social work lecturers already had significant transferable experience in facilitating reflective groups. Prior to this, they had received training in VERP from the educational psychologists (VIG accredited supervisors). In keeping with the VERP model, during the project the facilitators engaged in supervision involving reflection on clips of their own group facilitation.

This strengths-based video analysis approach placed reflection at the center of students' learning. Students were asked to reflect formally at two points for each role-play: immediately after the role-play to consider their skills used in the exchange, and then after the reflective discussion where video-analysis had been used to reflect on skills. A self-reflection form (described below and reproduced in the [appendix](#)) was used to guide students' reflection.

Evaluation methodology

Our purpose in evaluating the project was to find out the views of the social work students on how using VERP had affected their development of communication skills.

Participants

All students ($n = 43$) who undertook the role-play consented to this evaluation. Thirty students contributed data for the evaluation, with twenty-one completing the first self-reflection form and thirty completing the second.

Measures

Self-Reflection Form (SRF)

This included a 10-point semantic differential scale which measured students' perceptions of their attentiveness to the PI member, how initiatives were received and the value of reflection. Students were also asked to provide explanations of how they demonstrated attentiveness and how initiatives were received. Further open-text questions asked what they had learned about their communication skills during the reflective discussion (i.e. what 'went well', thus emphasizing the strengths based approach) and how this might then inform future practice, thus scaffolding the learning experience. On completion, the self-reflection forms were uploaded to the students' electronic portfolios for overview by the course team.

Focus Group (FG)

A year after completion of the project, five students met with two of the lecturers in an hour-long focus group. Recruitment was via a general e-mail invitation to the cohort. The focus group took place online via Microsoft Teams and all participants consented to being recorded and for their wording to be used in this evaluation. The students were asked about their experience of doing the role-plays, how prepared they had felt, and how they had felt about being filmed. They were asked to discuss their experience of watching their role-play and identifying a clip, showing this and seeing each other's clips, and their learning points from the reflective discussions. They were also asked for their views on this method in comparison to other learning and teaching methods, whether they had subsequently been able to apply any of their learning when on placement, and what improvements they would suggest.

Analysis

A thematic analysis was undertaken on the focus group transcript and students' open comments in the self-reflection forms, following the basic steps of Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Detailed coding was undertaken (with the codes drawn from the data), and these codes and the related data were then collated into a number of potential themes. Initially the self-reflection forms and the focus group data were considered separately, but then amalgamated, leading to further analysis and development of the emerging themes.

Ethical approval

The University Research Ethics Committee provided approval for this evaluation (CSHE-STAFF 1815). In order to gain consent from students to use their self-reflection forms from their electronic portfolio, they were provided with an information and consent form during a teaching session at the start of the module. All students consented to have their data included in this evaluation.

Findings

Findings are presented under the themes that emerged through the thematic analysis: Noticing and naming skills; Seeing more: impact of the visual approach; Confidence, reassurance and achievement: The value of a strengths-based approach; ‘You are all in it together’: interactivity and the contribution of peer learning; and The value of reflective learning.

Noticing and naming skills

When reviewing their videos students identified a range of specific verbal and non-verbal communication skills they had demonstrated, and in some cases the application of theoretical models—also indicating that the method supported them in connecting theory and practice—for example:

Using paraphrasing, reflecting back, minimal encouragers, summarising helped me to communicate better. (SRF)

I was able to paraphrase during the role-play and I had tried to include SOLER especially by keeping eye contact. (SRF)

Being able to identify one’s skills is a crucial part of the learning process for social work students. Gast and Bailey (2014, p. 21) assert that the ability ‘to adapt, to change, and consciously choose from a wide repertoire of behaviours, knowledge, skills and approaches’ is central to good communication in social work. This ability also involves a conscious awareness of skills being used, or that could be used, in a given situation, and being able to move between modes of unconscious competence and conscious competence (Gast & Bailey, 2014). The visual nature of the VERP method was ideal for facilitating this transitional process.

Seeing more: impact of the visual approach

The opportunity for ‘repeat viewing’ not only helped students to identify skills as suggested above, but also had a marked effect on their ability to analyze what they saw in greater depth and gain new self-awareness:

It helped me witness techniques that I had been unconsciously doing, helping me establish what is effective. (SRF)

I learnt that I do demonstrate skills such as active listening very well without noticing that I am doing it. (SRF)

These comments also illustrate that the method enabled the students to identify and evaluate their own interactions, thus learning through noticing the points themselves and reflecting on them, rather than relying on feedback or being ‘taught’.

Watching the videos also enabled students to notice, from the perspective of outside the interaction, where they may have come across differently to their original perceptions or intentions, as one noted:

... what I picked up on was like facial expressions and body language. . made me mindful of how you present yourself and how you think you present yourself in your head is very different. (FG)

Three members of the focus group described themselves as ‘visual learners’ and found the visual aspects particularly helpful, partly because it was possible to watch repeatedly ‘to see where you missed something’, but also because it felt more vivid and memorable than other forms of learning, for example:

Maybe because it’s visual, it stays with you I think longer sometimes than notes on a piece of paper. (FG)

However, there were mixed views from the focus group on their experience of being filmed. One felt more nervous, ‘I’m not a camera person at all’ and it was a ‘pressure’, and for another, ‘knowing the camera’s on you, you overthink everything’. On the other hand one student found it helpful that recording it ‘makes you feel a bit more professional like you’re actually doing the role’.

Students in the focus group also valued the experiential nature of the learning method and considered it to be a good preparation for social work practice with its embodied and interactional elements. The focus group took place after the students had completed their first placement, and participants appreciated the way the process had prepared them for being observed on placement and receiving feedback, as well as for dealing with similar scenarios in practice.

Reassurance, confidence and achievement: the value of a strengths-based approach

Many of the students’ comments (both SRF and FG) indicated they felt they had grown in confidence through the process. In our experience, this educational activity generates anxieties for students about the unknown responses of the PI members and the videoing of their interactions. The strengths-based approach to identifying the clips, and within the reflective discussions, kept the focus on pinpointing and naming good practice with the aim of building on this for the future. Concentrating on reflecting on what had gone well, as opposed to what needed to be improved, had the effect of both reducing anxiety and enhancing confidence:

everyone . . . would compliment everyone else’s video so it reassured you. (FG)

It’s really easy to knock yourself all the time and look at the bad things. But it was nice to have that more ingrained in you that you know there will be positives in any sort of interaction. (FG)

Reflection has allowed me to gain confidence in my performance. I will be less nervous next time. (SRF)

Reflection allowed me to see strengths and good character and confidence within myself. (SRF)

An increased level of confidence was associated partly with a sense of achievement at having been able to succeed at a difficult task, and partly with seeing the concrete evidence of themselves demonstrating relevant skills:

It does definitely bring on the confidence more for placement because you know you've already done it and you've something to reflect back on, and you constantly kind of reassure yourself well, actually I can do this. (FG)

One student found that being pushed to take a risk was important, and success brought a feeling of agency and control:

... it pushed me. I didn't feel comfortable, I was out of my comfort zone. I have to be pushed in order to try and go further. 'Cause once I've done it I kind of feel better, it's like, OK, you know, I can do it ... It feels more comfortable and then more like in control. (FG)

When individuals are in their comfort zone they are more likely to stay in an automatic, unreflective state of mind (Gast & Bailey, 2014; Hawkins & Shohet, 2006). Hawkins and Shohet (p17) note that in order to learn we need to move from our comfort zone into our 'learning zone', which involves tolerating a level of discomfort and 'not knowing'. As already discussed, social workers need to be able to switch from unconscious to conscious competence when required, for example when the unexpected occurs. Mistakes are more likely when workers do not switch from an unconscious to a conscious mode (Gast & Bailey, 2014). This suggests it is helpful for students to start to develop familiarity with discomfort.

Focus group members all agreed they had felt well prepared for the activity. To scaffold the learning process and help contain their anxiety, the students were given information and preparation activities for the task and had also undertaken a module on communication and interpersonal skills which had involved them recording short clips of themselves in role-play with each other. There was a comment in the focus group that this made it easier to undertake the role-play with the PI member, with 'the transition a bit smoother for us all'.

Some students in the focus group indicated they would have liked more feedback in the reflective groups on areas for improvement rather than solely a focus on what went well, and that they had found it helpful when the PI members gave them 'tips' for next time, or constructive feedback, for example 'with my nerves she said I smile too much which was a really good point, so I really learned from that'.

This evaluation did not specifically seek to measure progress between time 1 and time 2, but it is noteworthy that in the self-reflection forms students identified development between the two experiences:

Improvement since last time – confidence. More use of interaction and awareness. (SRF)

I realised I had improved. (SRF)

We recognize that other factors may have contributed to this increased confidence stated in the self-reflection forms (such as knowledge gained from the modules they undertook in the interim). Nevertheless, the strong emphasis on the benefits of the VERP tasks in increasing confidence reported in the focus group responses is noteworthy as a contributing factor. Participants in the focus group also identified ongoing growth, for example:

it made me continue to build on it and continue to progress ... the confidence just continued to grow from there. (FG)

'You are all in it together': interactivity and the contribution of peer learning

Students in the focus group expressed positive views about the interactive nature of the reflective groups. Also important was the way students were able to contribute to each other's learning:

Other students ... picked up on things you would have just sort of like looked straight past ... someone picked up that I was doing the same hand gestures as the PI user and that I hadn't even thought about that or anything. But they was like, no, that's really good because it shows you're paying attention to her. (FG)

Positive reinforcement is really important and peer mentoring I find really supportive 'cause you are all in it together. You know, especially when you qualify and you're in the team, you know your team are there to support you. So that peer sort of colleague sort of relationship is really important. (FG)

The value of reflective learning

Particularly encouraging was the emphasis and importance students gave to the process of reflection. On their self-reflection forms, most students scored themselves in the top quarter of the 10-point scale when asked 'how helpful was it to reflect on your experiences?' Furthermore, between time 1 and time 2 there was a general trend for the score to increase for this question, evidencing their growing comfort with, and value placed on, the process:

Reflection throughout this whole task has been helpful in gaining an understanding of how vital communication is. It has shown me the importance of changing the way you communicate to cater for individual needs. (SRF)

This role-play has helped me to listen more and take a step back. ...[and] allow the service user to express themselves more and encourage them to talk. (SRF)

This development in students' capacity to listen, respond to the other and adapt their approach is significant, as in our experience first year students in role-plays often feel the need to rush into giving advice or solving the problem for the other participant before hearing their views. As Lishman (2009, p. 40) points out, inexperienced students often fall into a 'question-and-answer' routine, with the underlying assumption that the worker is the expert who will provide the solution once the service user has given information about the problem.

Students could also learn about the unpredictable nature of social work encounters (which also links to earlier points about learning to tolerate discomfort and 'not knowing'), in that

while preparation was valuable, in practice unfolding situations need to be responded to in the moment by, as one student put it, 'go[ing] with the flow'. Another reflected:

... we was really prepared but ... you can try and prepare so much prior to it, but when you're in that room everything kind of just goes and you kind of just go with how the situation is. (FG)

The combined impact of both seeing and naming the skills they had identified and using a strengths-based approach in the reflective groups appeared to support students to consider their next steps in developing their communication skills by building on the moments where interaction went well:

The discussion pointed out the strengths in my communication skills. This means I will repeat these in my next role-play. (SRF)

I learnt that small things such as the way you are sat can have a positive impact. (SRF)

I will (continue) to check I have understood what the client is saying to me. (SRF)

Next time I will listen and be more comfortable with silence. (SRF)

Many of the comments above demonstrate students' grasp of the VERP principles of listening and attuned interactions. This illustrates the value of this method as not focusing on building students' skills and competence in an instrumental way, but instead focusing on developing their capacity for awareness, attunement to the other, and sensitive response in the moment; an approach that is less about 'performing' and more about 'being' and relationship. This focus on being mindfully 'present' to the other was summed up by one of the students in the focus group:

It taught me to be in the presence of someone ... give myself some headspace and just be with that person ... to just probably slow down a little bit and stop thinking about 100 million things at once. . about headspace again and being in the moment. (FG)

Discussion

The findings from students' reflective forms and the focus group discussion indicate the potential of VERP as an effective and empowering form of reflective practice for developing students' communication skills. While sharing some aspects with the role-play or video methods commonly used in social work education, VERP differs from these in its particular combination of the visual process, use of reflective discussion, strengths-based approach and specific method and theoretical base.

Principles of active learning are essential, with students being encouraged to take ownership of their development. The students are the first to see their videos and identify what went well, and importantly they have control over which video clips to share in the reflective groups. The facilitator's role is to draw the learning out of the students by stimulating reflection, rather than 'teaching' them in a traditional way. Facilitator skills are therefore important, as was found by Gillingham (2008). Occasionally in the discussions students might identify something as a skill that was not in keeping with the principles of attuned interactions (for example rushing into giving advice in an inappropriate way), which would require sensitive input from the facilitator.

The findings suggest that being able to watch their own recordings increased students' awareness of skills they had used tacitly, enabling movement between unconscious and conscious competence (Gast & Bailey, 2014). It also built their confidence, self-efficacy and sense of agency as they could see concrete evidence of themselves self-modeling particular skills, responding to the other person and impacting on the interaction, potentially leading to a changed perception of themselves, for example now feeling 'I can do it' (FG).

The strengths-based element is also fundamental. Not only does this reduce students' anxiety levels and increase their confidence, it also helps them to identify aspects they can easily 'do more'. As these aspects for further development are drawn from the student's own demonstrated behavior they will therefore be within their capacity and experience (Kennedy and Landor 2015). Gast and Bailey (2014, p. 138) also point out that it is easier to build on identified strengths than to break habits or develop new skills:

By building on these strengths, new ways of working can become more achievable. In contrast, trying to use newly learned skills can be a real challenge for many. Change is difficult for most people, so being aware of one's own communication strengths is part of the journey of change.

A number of potential limitations may be identified. Our focus in this study was on students' perspectives of the process; therefore our findings are based on students' self-reporting and not from any objective measures, and do not include data on outcomes for people experiencing social work services. Students' self-report of their growth in confidence and self-efficacy is not necessarily a reliable indicator of an increase in their assessed level of skill (Bolger, 2014; Thompsett et al., 2017). It was also not possible to isolate how far the VERP process, as opposed to other learning experiences, led to their perceived increase in confidence and skill development. Future research could include perceptions of people with lived experience and/or additional forms of measurement.

Students in the focus group also indicated they would like constructive feedback on areas for improvement. Our method did include each student receiving developmental feedback from the PI member at the end of the role-play, which was valued by students in the focus group. This is not, however, part of the VERP method itself. The focus of the current study is on VERP so we have not included discussion of the PI members' participation and feedback here (see Skoura-Kirk et al. (2021) for this in relation to an earlier project). We have reflected on the students' feedback and conclude that the method may be effectively combined with students receiving private individual feedback, as they did in this project, but that it is important to maintain the strengths-based focus within the video review process and group discussion, to counteract the common tendency to be critical, especially students on their own skills, and to build their feelings of safety, confidence and self-efficacy.

Another potential limitation is that the VERP method does not directly give attention to the impacts of wider contextual factors such as economic and social inequalities and intersecting social divisions that will play a part in any social work interaction. However, although VERP does not specifically focus on these aspects, reflective practice can lead people to greater thoughtfulness, self-awareness and questioning of their own social and political position (Landor, 2015). A focus on achieving sensitive attuned interactions also inherently involves attention to the micro-level power dynamics within interactions.

VERP concentrates on changing the nature of interaction between people, not on judging the ability of a service user to 'engage' or the competence of the social worker, but on enhancing what happens in the interactional space between them, and thus has the potential for reducing judgmental practice. The learning process we followed was also as democratic and collaborative as possible, with the PI members being the first to give feedback, students identifying their own learning and having control of their recordings and which clips to show, the peer group having an important role in the reflective discussions, and the lecturers' input being facilitative and strengths-based.

A consideration to bear in mind is that this was a collaborative project between educational psychologists and social work academics, and it is important for VERP facilitators to be trained in the VERP methods and principles and to be supervised in the reflective development of their own skills. We would therefore recommend seeking collaboration with those who can offer these skills and build capacity to facilitate VERP. Given the potential time implications of this and the pressurized context of social work education, as well as the limitations of the data collected in this evaluation, further exploration would be appropriate on the possible role and impact of implementing VERP in pre-qualifying education.

Conclusion

For first year students VERP can help lay a foundation for learning important social work skills which may then be further developed and honed through experience and practice. VERP's strong theoretical base, clear method and provision of a set of principles and tools for students to carry forward, provide a potential answer to the need for greater theoretical and pedagogical clarity identified in reviews of communication skills teaching in social work (Dinham, 2006; Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2019; Trevithick et al., 2004).

VERP combines awareness of observable and usable micro-skills with the recognition, central to reflective practice, of the uniqueness and complexity of practice encounters (Ruch, 2002). Our findings indicate that the use of VERP may help to promote students' initial capacities for reflection, attuned interactions, being 'present', and learning to maintain 'a "not knowing" stance' (Ruch, 2013, p. 60). It has potential for developing their awareness and micro-skills to respond sensitively, in the moment, to initiatives from the person they are with, together with awareness of the impact their responses may have on the other and on the interaction between them. These are important elements of reflective practice, and as a particular practical method for developing reflective skills and confidence VERP can support social work students' capacity to use reflection as a way of learning.

While this is a small-scale project with first year undergraduate students and further exploration would be beneficial, there also appears potential for the VERP method and principles to be used with more experienced social work students and practitioners, as an effective and empowering means of facilitating reflection on their interactions with others, enhancing attunement and reciprocity, and as a tool for professional development.

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Notes on contributors

Anne Kelly, PhD, formerly a Senior Lecturer in Social Work is now an honorary academic at the University of Kent. Her interests include social work communication and the emotional and ethical dimensions of social work decision making and practice.

Sarah Brown is a Staff Tutor at the Open University with over 14 years' experience in social work education. Her research interests are in skill development of social work learners as well as factors affecting retention rates in social work. She has an MA in Social Work and is a SFHEA.

Andrea Honess, DEdPsy, is an Associate Professor and Co-Programme Director for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology at UEA and also practises as a Senior Educational Psychologist. Her interests include use of VIG to facilitate reflective professional development and socio-cultural historical approaches to applied psychological research in education.

Michelle McCaffrey, EdPsyD, is a Child and Educational Psychologist and VIG supervisor and practitioner, with interests in working with Social Work professional education and the use of VIG.

Tom Parkinson, PhD, is Reader in the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of Kent, where he is Programme Director for the MA in Higher Education. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA).

Eleni Skoura-Kirk, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Kent. She has worked in social work education for over 17 years. Her research interests relate to youth homelessness, co-production and skills development in social work education as well as use of discourse analysis and identity construction in social work.

ORCID

Anne Kelly  <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-5079-976X>

Sarah Brown  <http://orcid.org/0009-0000-5099-1867>

Andrea Honess  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-6804-6035>

Michelle McCaffrey  <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-9209-1815>

Thomas Parkinson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0990-9507>

Eleni Skoura-Kirk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0356-2802>

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Appendices

Appendix A

Student Self Reflection Form 1

This must be completed immediately after the role-play and placed in a box in xxx

Student Name:

PI Scenario (initials):

We will return the forms to you in the reflective discussion groups on the 3rd December in order for you to complete the last questions and then **retain your sheet** for inclusion in your portfolio.

For the following questions, please circle a number which best reflects how you feel

1. *How well would you rate your performance in the roleplay?*
Not at all well **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** Very well
2. *How good is your knowledge around communication theory?*
Could have more knowledge **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** Confident with knowledge
3. *How confident are you in your skills in using this theory in practice?*
Could have more confidence **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** Am very confident
4. *How much do you need to develop your communication skills?*
Not at all **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** Very much

Considering the role-play you have just experienced and the service user feedback you have been given please answer the following:

- (1) What went well in the role-play?
- (2) What did not go well?
- (3) How did you feel during the role-play?
- (4) Did any of these feelings 'come out' during the role-play?
- (5) Can you think of anything you have learnt from social work which has influenced your approach during the interview?
- (6) Did issues of diversity impact on your approach in the role-play?
- (7) Was there anything unexpected during the role-play? If so, how did you manage it?
- (8) What did you think of your feedback?

Appendix B

Student Self-Reflection Form 2

Student Name:

PI member (initials):

You will have the opportunity to repeat the role-play activity in March. With this in mind, please complete the following questions **after the reflective discussion of your video clip on the 3rd December**. Please use the guidance sheet from the reflective discussion for guidance too. Once you have completed this form you need to retain it for your electronic portfolios

1. *How well would you rate your attentiveness to the PI member in the role-play?*
Not at all well **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** Very well

- Can you explain how you demonstrated this?
2. How well did you receive the PI member initiatives in the role-play?
Not at all well **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** Very well
Can you explain how you demonstrated this?
3. How helpful was it to reflect on your experiences?
Not helpful to reflect **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** Reflection is very helpful
4. What did you learn about your communication skills during the reflective discussion (i.e. what went well)
5. Has this discussion informed what you will you do next time in your role-play, of so, how?