Playing its part: An evaluation of professional skill development through service user-led role-plays for social work students

Eleni Skoura-Kirk, Sarah Brown & Rasa Mikelyte

Published online: 21 May 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Playing its part: An evaluation of professional skill development through service user-led role-plays for social work students

Eleni Skoura-Kirk[a], Sarah Brown[b] and Rasa Mikelyte[c]

[a]School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, Medway Campus ME4 4AG, Kent, UK; [b]School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, UK; [c]Centre for Health Services Studies, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a UK-based evaluation of service user-led role-play interviews for social work students. Skill development relating to 'procedural competencies' (relationship forming, communication skills) and 'meta-competencies' (linking theory to practice, reflection) is explored using a mixed-method repeated-measures design. Assessment feedback from student self-ratings (N = 32), as well as service user (N = 7) and practice educator (N = 4) ratings were compared at two time points. An overall improvement of the students' professional skills was identified, with a notable divergence regarding what had improved: students focused on procedural skills, practice educators on cognitive skills, whereas service users focused on relational/embodied aspects . Moreover, what counted as 'improvement' varied between the groups: when considering 'problem-solving' students and practice educators were emphasizing the importance of not rushing to resolutions, whereas service users were praising students who were proactive and solution-focused. The findings assert the value of service user-led educational activities not only as contributing to the improvement of social work students' skill development but also as providing a perspective that may challenge the dominance of professional narratives in social work education. The findings have specific implications for curriculum development and evaluation of service user-led activities.

Introduction

Despite a general consensus that service user involvement in social work education 'is essentially a good thing' (Rhodes, 2012, p. 187), evidence about its impact on skill development is limited (Robinson & Webber, 2013). In the UK, the involvement of service users and carers has been a requirement since 2003, recognizing experiential knowledge as central to producing competent practitioners (Department of Health, 2002), leading to innovative pedagogical activities (admissions interview panels, practice assessment, classroom teaching; Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2009). Current

knowledge suggests a number of beneficial outcomes: students highly value user and carer involvement as promoting empathy and a deeper understanding of lived experience (what Tanner et al., 2017, termed 'making it real'), whilst users and carers assert that their involvement can challenge power imbalances in practice and in education (Sadd, 2011). However, the need for rigorous evaluation of potential outcomes of user-led educational activities, especially relating to skill acquisition and application (as opposed to evaluating process) has been identified by Rhodes (2012) and Robinson and Webber (2013).

Role-plays are closely linked to preparation and assessment of social work students for direct practice. To be assessed as 'ready to practice', the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) for social workers in England (British Association of Social Workers, 2018) stipulates that students need to demonstrate core communication skills, an initial understanding of theory, and ability to reflect on their own values. Experiential learning is a proven pedagogical approach to enable social work students the opportunity to bridge the gap between 'knowing' and 'doing' before going into placement to practice 'for real' (Cheung & Dalavega, 2014). This has led to calls for increased service user involvement in role-plays, both as participants and as assessors of skills (Lu et al., 2011; Tompsett et al., 2017; Wilson & Kelly, 2010).

There is emerging empirical evidence that service user-led role-plays are beneficial to student learning (Moss et al., 2007; Wilson & Kelly, 2010) and highly valued by them (Hitchin, 2016). Research by Hughes (2017) outlines role-plays as one of the most highly rated service user-led educational experiences by final year social work students and recent graduates, as they provided direct opportunities to improve practice skills through service user feedback. Development of procedural skills such as empathy and active listening, as well as increased meta-competencies such as self-awareness have been noted by students (Hitchin, 2016). Furthermore, student preconceptions can be challenged through service user-led role-play, for example, communicating with someone with a profound disability or recognizing the needs of carers (Skilton, 2011). Application of academic learning in practice scenarios can also be reinforced, particularly communication and interviewing skills (Hitchin, 2016). Service users also gain a number of benefits: feeling valued, enjoying increased confidence in their educational role, and contributing to the education of the next generation of social workers (Hitchin, 2016; Moss et al., 2007).

Nonetheless, service user-led role-play learning is not without its challenges. The quality and validity of feedback were highlighted by some students in Skilton's study (Skilton, 2011) as insufficient, or overly positive, not matching (subsequent) feedback from academic tutors (findings also echoed in Pearl et al., 2018). Variation in the skills, confidence and expectations of each service user can also create an inconsistent learning experience for students (Hitchin, 2016). The ethical dimensions of the learning activity have also been raised (Duffy et al., 2013), recognizing the potential emotional impact of using role-play scenarios mirroring service-users' personal experiences. Anxiety and apprehension regarding role-plays are also consistently noted by students, linked to low skill confidence (Duffy et al., 2013); for some students, this anxiety can negatively affect their performance (Hitchin, 2016).

Overall, the evidence base on the effectiveness of service user-led role-plays identifies both benefits and areas for improvement. One of the key limitations is the nature of the evidence. Current knowledge is predominantly drawn from studies that capture student,

staff and service user feedback with a view to improving the pedagogy of the role-play activity (Hitchin, 2016; Moss et al., 2007; Skilton, 2011). Far less work focuses on the observed and measured changes in procedural skill acquisition and meta-competency development. Importantly the impact of these competencies on subsequent social work practice also remains unclear. No studies to date have explored students' competencies in relation to service user-led role-plays, and none have looked at change over time—be it in satisfaction or in development related to the role-plays.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to addressing this gap. Our evaluation involves service user-led role-plays, and is examining development in relation to both procedural skills as well as the higher-order reflective ability (meta-competency) for the same student group at two points in time. A repeated-measures evaluation approach was adopted as this not only captures *skill assessment* (establishing student skill levels during the first role-play) but also examines *skills development* (establish whether skills improved over time). Lastly, we do not rely only on student self-assessment, but also seek service user and practice educator assessments of student skills development.

Overall, this article aims to explore if student communication, interpersonal and reflective skills improve between the first and second service user-led role-plays, and if students, service users and practice educators agreed on the magnitude and nature of change in students' skills.

Throughout the article, we have made use of the term 'service user' and an abbreviation to SU when reporting findings. We recognize the contested nature of this term and that it does not always best represent the identity, status and expertise of individuals and groups in society. We have adopted it in this paper by siding with the definition put forward by the Shaping our Lives Network of Service Users and Disabled People (Shaping Our Lives, 2019), to denote shared experience and highlight oppression and inequality.

Service user-led role-plays: design and implementation

In order to explore the development of social work students' procedural skills and reflective development, our evaluation was based on service user-led role-plays with first-year undergraduate social work students, a formative assessment undertaken as part of the Readiness for Direct Practice (RfDP) module. The module spans the academic year (September to May), covering theoretical, practice-based and experiential learning, and is delivered by academics, practitioners and service users. The role-plays took place twice in the academic year (November 2017 and March 2018) and were led by service users and carers, who are members of the social work Partnership Initiative (PI) group. The group is comprised of individuals with experience of social care services (linked to physical disability, mental health, growing up in state care, caring for a family member) and has been contributing to the University's social work programmes since 2003. Of the seven people involved in this activity six were women. The service users wrote the role-play scenarios to simulate an initial meeting between a social worker and a service user and were of similar complexity on both occasions, allowing for comparison of student performance at Time 1 and Time 2. Often, the service users chose to write scenarios loosely reflecting their own experiences (as was the case in Skilton, 2011). Nevertheless, they were framed as fictional allowing the service users to choose whether to share key elements of individual experience, in order to protect their emotional wellbeing (Duffy et al., 2013). The students received the

Table 1. Role-play Evaluation Strategy.

		When	How	How often
Who participated?	What activity was evaluated?	were ratings on the activity provided?		
32 Social Work Students (SWS)	(a) 15 minute role-play between one SWS and one SU, and (b) PE-facilitated reflective discussion	Students encouraged to complete part (a) of the self-ratings after the role-play and part (b) a week later, after the reflective discussion	10 open ended questions followed by a 5-item survey using 10-point semantic differential scales	Once in November 2017 and again in March 2018
7 Service Users (SU)	15 minute role-play between one SWS and one SU	Immediately after each role-play	15-item questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale	Once in November 2017 and again in March 2018
4 Practice Educators (PE)	PE-facilitated reflective discussion with a group of 6–10 SWSs	2-3 days after the reflective discussion	3-item questionnaire on a 10-point semantic differential scale and a descriptive overview	Once in November 2017 and again in March 2018

scenarios in advance and were briefed as to the expectations of the role-play. An example scenario is provided below:

D visited her doctor as a result of minor injuries sustained due to domestic abuse. Whilst in the surgery she broke down and admitted that this abuse was frequent and was escalating. She has a young daughter and can see no way out of her situation. The doctor contacted Social Services on her behalf, today is the first visit.

Student performance was assessed in three ways: by student own self-ratings, by service users and by practice educators (see Table 1). Service users undertook an assessment of the students specifically linked to the procedural competencies of communication skills and relationship forming (based on Woodcock Ross, 2016). Four practice educators (social workers who have qualifying experience in practice education; Practice Educator Professional Standards Stage 2, The College of Social Work, 2014) were employed by the University to undertake reflective group discussions after the role-play activity, exploring the students' reflections on what went well, what knowledge and skills were relevant and their emotional responses to the role-play (link to the notion of meta-competencies, as outlined by Bogo, Regehr, Logie et al., 2011). Self-assessment of performance was also at the heart of the activity: following the role-play, students completed a self-assessment form which asked about the skills they had demonstrated (a) immediately after the role-play (b) following the reflective discussion, including making links between theory and practice.

Two academics (first and second author) 'recruited' service users to the activity, offered relevant training (with a particular focus on assessment feedback and the ethics of 'sharing stories') and debrief sessions after each round of role-plays. Offices at the University were used as the venue but no academics were present during the role-plays.

Evaluation: methodology

Participants

All of the service users and all of the practice educators who participated in the role-play consented to take part in the evaluation; of the 38 students who took part in roleplays, 32 (84% of the cohort) took part in the evaluation. Demographic information was only collected from the students; they were aged from 19 to 50 (M = 26.19, SD = 8.19); 97% were female, reflecting the national profile of social work students in the UK. One student did not take part in the first role-play and another student did not participate in, or rate, the second role-play due to illness.

Measures

Table 2 outlines the measures used. Each rating form included qualitative and quantitative measures and captured student skills. It is important to note that the measures defined above were initially designed as assessment forms for pedagogical purposes, and were later provided by the students, service users and practice educators for the purposes of the evaluation.

Procedure

Potential participants (students, SUs and PEs) were approached by a member of the administrative staff via e-mail, given an information sheet about the study and a consent

Table 2. Qualitative and Quantitative Measures by Rater Type.

Rater	Qualitative Section	Quantitative Section	Feedback Form Structure
Student self-ratings	10 open-ended questions; e.g., 'What went well?'	5-item survey using 10-point semantic differential scales which measured performance, knowledge of theory, confidence, helpfulness of reflection and need to develop skills	Student feedback started with 10 open-ended questions followed by the 10 survey questions.
Service user (SU) ratings	2 open-ended questions; e.g., 'what did the student do that you really liked?'	15-item questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale, which measured quality of introduction, explanations of meeting purpose and agenda, sticking to time, listening to the service user, allowing for expression of user views, understanding user views, ensuring user comfort, treating user with respect, care for user feelings, asking relevant questions, avoiding jargon, preparedness for meeting, quality of ending the meeting, and student confidence[1]	SU feedback form started with the 15-item questionnaire then followed by open-ended questions.
Practice Educator (PE) ratings	3 open-ended questions; e.g., 'Were students able to make links to theory and knowledge in the field?'	10-point semantic differential scale which measured student group cognitive, reflective and affective development[2]	Each form of development was first measured by an open-ended question then followed by a semantic differential scale.

[1](adapted from Woodcock Ross, 2016)
[2](based on Bogo, Regehr, Katz et al., 2011)

form. Those people who opted into the study then provided their assessment/rating forms to the administrative staff. These forms were then passed on to the third author (not involved in social work education) who assigned identifying codes to the forms and redacted any identifiable information thereby protecting participant identity.

Each PE rated a group of six to 10 students in a group, while each service user (individually) rated between three and seven students. The same PE rated the same student at both role-plays, while five students were rated by different SUs at Time 1 and Time 2 (due to SU illness). Students then received their feedback forms via an online learning platform, where they also uploaded their own self-ratings (See Table 1).

Ethical issues

Ethical approval to conduct this evaluation was granted by the University's Research Ethics Panel. It was made sure that identifying codes allowed researchers to see Time 1 and Time 2 ratings relating to the same individual and track change, but no personal identifiable information was used on whom the participant was.

Design and data analysis

Data from Time 1 and Time 2 of the role-play evaluations were entered into SPSS. Missing information was excluded listwise. Data for the open-ended questions were analyzed thematically. Quotes illustrating the themes are highlighted in the results section.

Results

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the qualitative information from evaluation forms have revealed three principal findings.

1. Skill improvement

All three parties (students, service users and practice educators) agreed that there had been an overall improvement of students' professional skills through the role-play exercise.

Students

The students' reflective comments clearly identify improvement in procedural and meta-competency skills. Specific communication skills include awareness of body language and facial expressions, making eye contact, asking the service user how they want to be addressed, explaining confidentiality, asking open questions and demonstrating active listening. Comments also suggest that reflective skills tend to deepen after the second role-play and in particular, after the second reflective group discussion led by the PE:

'I have learnt that everything isn't so "textbook"' (S09).

A key issue discussed by students (15 out of 32) was that of improved confidence; even though the prospect of the role-play interviews caused a lot of anxiety, after the second round of role-plays their belief in their abilities had increased:

> *'Since the first role play I feel that I have gained many new communication skills, I am a lot more confident when speaking to service users'* (S18)

This is also linked to facilitating a better rapport with service users and appearing more confident as a professional:

> *'... being confident with the service user can greatly change their perspective of you and what you say.'* (S28)

Service users

The SUs also assert improvement in students' skills, with a key area being the improvement in the confidence of students. One service user provided the following feedback for one student after the first role-play:

> *'Student was so nervous that it is very difficult to answer these two questions [in the feedback form] ... shows signs of future promise but will have to work on [their] approach to service users and lack of confidence'* (P03 for S22)

In the Spring term this had changed to:

> *"Student goes from strength to strength [...] is confident and capable and knows how to ask the right questions."*

The same service user pointed out one particular change in another student's communication skills:

> *'Last time [the student] giggled through nerves but now has this under control and is very professional'* (P03 for S07)

Practice educators

The feedback from PEs points to improved knowledge and skills for students after the second round of role-play interviews. They also identify the increased self-esteem and a more relaxed approach to the task by students, as well as better ability to make clear links between theory and practice.

> *'Certainly there was a general acceptance that the students felt more relaxed this time ... being more relaxed helped with the interview process, helped build respect between the student and the service user and helped to "let the conversation flow"'* (E01)

The group discussions also helped foster a more constructive approach to receiving feedback, especially where the first feedback had been critical, or not detailed enough to allow students to address issues during the second role-play.

2. Diverging emphasis on what had improved

Even though all three parties touched upon similar areas of skills improvement (confidence, communication skills), there was a noticeable divergence of emphasis.

Students: procedural, explicit improvement

The students' forms demonstrated a much more explicit discussion of procedural skills improvement, using specialized language to dissect their performance around communication skills (use of SOLER communication, phatic questions, introductions and endings, timekeeping). For example, one student said:

> 'I ensured that I was: summarising, reflecting, using minimal encouragers, showing empathy, used empowering speech and my body language was open' (S24)

Their engagement with meta-competencies was not as explicitly articulated. Many of them responded 'no' when asked whether there were 'any values and ethics issues' during the role-plays, and tended to conflate theory and skills in responses, especially in the first role-play feedback. However, this did not mean that meta-competencies were absent; instead they were mainly implicit in rich descriptions of incidents. For example, even though they could not name it as such, they were able to identify issues around their use of self as part of the professional interaction:

> 'Looking back, I wish I had started with some phatic conversation .... I felt the questioning may have come across as intrusive and overbearing' (S14)

Service users: Relational and embodied improvement

The feedback comments from SUs focus more on the importance of relational qualities and the way in which the students were able to embody professionalism and person-centered social work. There were two main themes: the student's *presence* and the student *being present*.

The student's *presence* was a key focus of service user feedback; this related to how the student was coming across, their personal qualities. Positive assessment of student presence related to a relaxed and open manner, a warm and friendly approach, a good level of confidence and professionalism. With lower scores, this was linked to lack of confidence, being unprepared and the conversation feeling stilted.

> 'Has a friendly open manner which makes it easy to talk to [them]' (P06 for S11)

> 'Student needs a little more empathy. Some of [their] comments were a bit clinical and objective.' (P03 for SO6)

These qualities were often conveyed by the student's body language, with service users really appreciating those who had an open, relaxed posture. Confidence and a professional attitude were also valued. Even small details were of importance, for example, one service user commented on how positive it was for students to remove their coat at the start of the interview and how another's perfume was *'not overpowering'* (P06 for S12).

The second dimension of the relational/embodied emphasis on students' skills related to students *being present*. The SUs commented on students' ability to listen, often

expressed by the procedural skills students identified (introduction, paraphrasing, summarizing, probing).

'*Student is a good listener and makes helpful and insightful comments.*'(P03 for S06)

But more negatively:

'*Needs to hide that [they are] mentally ticking off a list.*' (P02 for S04)

There was a theme relating to students coming across as engaged and interested, or as one service user (P03) put it '[*They*] *looked as if [they] wanted to be there and to help me*'. This related to students showing an interest in the service user's story, their wellbeing, needs and feelings. For a number of service users this also promoted trust and a good rapport:

'*I felt relaxed and able to express myself without worrying.*'' (P04 for S26).

Lower feedback scores were associated with students rushing through the interview, repeating questions, abrupt endings and seeming detached. Most of the students were able to frame the feedback within a developmental perspective, which was encouraged during the reflective discussion. In addition to this, students were provided with the opportunity to meet with the module convenor to further explore their feedback and discuss implications for future practice.

Practice educators: cognitive/theory-to-practice links

The improvement primarily noted by practice educators related to cognitive dimensions of skills, with a particular emphasis on linking theory to practice:

'*More discussion about theories used—strengths-based, active listening and paraphrasing, Narrative theory, Ecological Theory, Systems Theory and even Solution-focused.*' (E01).

This was not only a case of reciting theories, but also applying them to the scenarios:

'*They referred to ecological systems and thought about how different factors impacted on different individuals. For example, there was some discussion about the relationships between foster siblings and how sibling rivalry can occur in foster families.*' (E04).

Of course, this emphasis on knowledge development can be mainly an indication of the role of the practice educators as facilitators of the reflective discussions. Nevertheless, the guidance provided to them did not just focus on how well students were integrating theory to practice, but also asked them to explore affective and reflective skills development (Bogo, Regehr, Katz et al., 2011). The disproportionate attention to cognitive dimensions of skills among the practice educations is, therefore, particularly noteworthy.

3. Competing ideas on what improvement is desired

Definitions of what improvement 'looks like' also differed; this was particularly visible around the theme of 'problem solving', with students and PEs providing a consistent message which was then contradicted by the SUs.

Students: slow down/tune in

Students were repeatedly identifying the need to take time, allow for silences and not rush into problem solving as key learning achieved through the role-play exercise. They showed awareness of the need to build rapport and trust and promote relationship-based approaches during their interview.

> 'I also found myself going down the route of trying to problem solve so had to find ways of steering the conversation away from resolutions.' (S25)

Practice educators: allow time for assessment

The above was also a point promoted by PEs during the reflective group discussions. Fine-tuning one's communication skills to allow for pauses and 'creative silences', to develop their hypotheses before offering solutions were key areas covered by these discussions:

> 'We discussed the temptation to problem-solve and offer solutions before the assessment stage has been completed. It was explored that there could be a risk of not only raising unrealistic expectations, but also not listening to the service user.' (E02)

Service users: proactive approach

For some service users high praise (and scores) were given to those students who came up with suggestions and were proactive in identifying potential ways forward; as such, problem solving was welcomed:

> 'Willingness to find out what can be done.' (P07 for S02)

> 'The student was brilliant! [They] thought of a lot of different resolutions to each issue and showed great professionalism.' (P05 for S28)

Quantitative findings

Table 3 presents the results of a paired *t*-test. The test demonstrates that PE ratings showed a statistically significant improvement between the first and second role-plays in student cognitive and affective development. Reflective development did not significantly improve, but it should be noted that at Time 1 the mean score for student reflective development ($M = 7.81$) was considerably higher than cognitive and affective development scores ($M = 6.61$ and $M = 6.81$ respectively). Thereby the scope for the change to be large is more limited.

Student self-ratings showed an improvement in knowledge of theory, confidence and skill development. Students already saw a high value in reflection at Time 1, so it is unsurprising that no significant improvement in perceived 'helpfulness of reflection' was observed. Self-ratings on performance also did not improve significantly. This suggests that asking students about their overall performance may be less meaningful than looking at specific skill development.

Table 3. Paired Sample *t*-test Results on Skill Development between Time 1 and Time 2 of Role-plays.

		Time 1		Time 2			
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*t-test*
PE Rating	1.Cognitive Development	6.61	1.17	7.97	.66	31	7.94***
	2.Reflective Development	7.81	.40	8.13	.89	31	1.58
	3.Affective Development	6.81	1.17	8.26	.45	31	5.09***
Student Self-Rating	4.Performance	6.75	1.43	7.50	1.53	28	2.01
	5.Knowledge of theory	6.34	1.78	7.97	1.32	29	4.74***
	6.Confidence	6.55	1.82	7.97	1.52	29	4.22***
	7.Helpfulness of Reflection	8.90	1.80	9.17	1.49	29	.90
	8.Developing skills	4.89	2.04	6.57	2.04	28	3.30**
SU Ratings	9.Introduction	4.07	1.14	4.77	.43	30	3.25**
	10.Explanation for meeting	4.06	1.06	4.42	.72	31	1.58
	11.Explanation of agenda	3.84	1.10	4.35	.76	31	2.44*
	12.Sticking to time	4.19	.91	4.61	.67	31	2.76*
	13.Listening to SU	4.39	.67	4.81	.40	31	3.24**
	14.Allowing for SU views	4.48	.63	4.74	.51	31	2.28*
	15.Understanding SU views	4.13	.82	4.53	.57	30	2.35*
	16.Look out for SU comfort	3.89	.83	4.46	.58	28	3.62**
	17.Treating SU with respect	4.63	.62	4.80	.41	30	1.54
	18.Care for SU feelings	4.29	.82	4.71	.53	31	2.89**
	19.Asking relevant questions	4.16	.86	4.48	.68	31	1.83
	20.Avoiding jargon	4.42	.56	4.71	.53	31	2.19*
	21.Preparedness for meeting	4.23	.82	4.53	.51	30	1.87
	22.Ending the meeting	4.16	.74	4.42	.56	31	1.86
	23.Confidence	3.90	.94	4.39	.56	31	2.34*
	24.Overall PE Rating	7.08	.69	8.12	.51	31	5.41***
	25.Overall Student Self-Rating	6.64	1.20	7.84	1.18	29	4.79***
	26.Overall SU rating	4.18	.59	4.60	.37	31	3.91***

*** *t*-test is significant at .001 level (2-tailed) ** *t*-test is significant at .01 level (2-tailed)
* *t*-test is significant at .05 level (2-tailed)

Lastly, SU ratings reveal a complex picture. The quality of the introduction, explanation of agenda, sticking to time, listening to the service user, allowing for service user views to be expressed, understanding their views, looking out for service user comfort, care for their feelings, avoiding jargon and student confidence showed a significant improvement in ratings between Time 1 and Time 2. Student explanation of the meeting aims to the service user, treating the service user with respect, asking relevant questions, preparedness for the meeting and the quality of the ending did not show a significant improvement. No aspects were judged as deteriorating. A factorial analysis was run to establish if the 15 survey items could be clustered into super-ordinate variables. Unsurprisingly, as the questionnaire was not originally constructed to tap into a smaller number of dimensions, no clear way of reducing data was found.

When the questionnaire scores were averaged for each rater (e.g., an average of 3 items for the PEs), this demonstrated that overall ratings significantly improved between Time 1 and Time 2 regardless of whether the rater was the student themselves, the SU or the PE.

In addition to this, Time 1 scores for each of the items was subtracted from the Time 2 score to measure individual change (i.e. if each participant improved, deteriorated or stayed the same on a particular rating variable). These were once again averaged per rater (PE, SU and student).

A correlation analysis was run to see if change in ratings was linked to the type—or group—of rater (see Table 4). In other words, the analysis examined if a greater

Table 4. Pearson Correlations for Change in Ratings Depending on Rater Group.

	N	M	SD	Correlations		
				1	2	3
1. Change in PE Ratings	31	2.35	.95	1		
2. Change in Student Rating	29	2.79	.56	−.24	1	
3. Change in SU Rating	31	2.74	.68	−.07	.56**	1

** Correlation is significant at .01 level (2-tailed)

improvement perceived by the students was related to a greater improvement perceived by SUs and PEs, or, for example, if a deterioration in SU-rated student performance was related to deterioration of self-assessed performance. The correlation analysis has demonstrated that Student and SU ratings were significantly positively associated (r (27) = .56, $p < .01$); a greater student improvement seen by the SU was related to a greater self-perceived improvement. However, there was no significant relationship between changes in PE and SU ratings, or PE and student-own ratings. PE perceived student improvement was not linked to that seen by SUs or students themselves. While it is noteworthy that the PEs evaluated group performance of the reflective discussion rather than individual role-play performance, which places a considerable limitation on drawing comparisons, the lack of significant relationship in ratings reflects qualitative findings on diverging emphases on what 'counts' as improvement.

Discussion

Both the qualitative and quantitative analysis in this study identified that students, service users and practice educators reported an overall improvement of the students' professional skills. Through our findings, we are building on the existing evidence-base that asserts the benefits of service user-led role-plays through student satisfaction and self-reported data (Duffy et al., 2013; Hitchin, 2016; Skilton, 2011). Whilst it is not possible to explain students' enhanced performance as exclusively related to a response to role-play feedback and related self-reflection, it is reasonable to infer that having the opportunity to re-apply skills, practice and refine techniques, whilst also drawing on the cognitive and emotional learning from the process, has had a significant positive impact (the 'formative integration of the whole'; Cheung & Dalavega, 2014, p. 1073). This supports the view that learning by 'doing' using experiential approaches is a beneficial activity for social work students. As highlighted by Sheppard and Charles (2017), critical thinking skills of social work students, linked to meta-competency, do not osmotically develop by virtue of just being on the programme. More time needs to be given to the 'plan, do and review' process as outlined in the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). Importantly, this proven benefit of cumulative skill development could inform pedagogical designs across the curriculum for University-based education, but also contribute to national debates about the pedagogy of fast-track approaches to social work education which potentially limit the time available for this meta-competency development (Scourfield et al., 2019).

A key—and in some ways unexpected—finding from our evaluation was that of the competing ideas as to what improvement 'looks like', illustrated in the 'problem solving' area of learning. Learning not to 'dive in too quickly to "fix" things' (Hitchin, 2016,

p. 977) was also asserted in our study as key learning by students and practice educators; however, some of the participating service users praised students with proactive and solution-focused approaches. This discrepancy could point to a difference of expectations amongst the assessor groups regarding levels of student skill. This was also noted by Skilton (2011) as service users could expect students to have the knowledge and skills of a qualified social worker, and as such ability to provide clear answers to the (often personally resonant) scenarios. However, and most importantly, it could also point toward a different conceptualization of what 'being listened to' means and diverging narratives on how 'good' practice is defined and experienced by service users in particular. McLeod (2006) has written on this discrepancy of what 'listening' can mean to social workers (showing respect and openness) and young people linking it to action taken by the social worker: a juxtaposition between respect and empowerment. We argue that this finding asserts the importance of service user-led role-plays, as not only contributing to the improvement of student skills, but also embedding a distinct perspective, complementing and even challenging professional narratives and academic orthodoxy. This is also emerging in the findings around what was assessed: the service users' emphasis on the relational/embodied performance of the professional role adds depth and in some ways unexpected feedback dimensions (i.e. perfume).

We need to be careful of course to not perpetuate artificial dichotomies between professionals and service users. This is not necessarily an 'us and them' configuration, especially as multiple identities can co-exist (students, academics or practitioners with experience of service use; Beresford and Boxall, 2012). Neither is our argument one of seeking a rigidly defined, 'correct' answer in terms of technical skill development and best practice. Rather, the above findings point to the need to understand and conceptualize 'good' practice in diverse ways. Seemingly opposing messages can co-exist, capturing the 'messy' reality of social work practice as bringing together the micro and macro: relationship-based and social justice informed social work. Such a reconfiguration of our understanding of good practice, when examined by all stakeholder perspectives, can lead to a nuanced and enriched understanding of professional skills and practice interactions.

This can also lead to a more critical exploration of the role and effectiveness of service user involvement in social work education. Even though advancements have been made in terms of pedagogy in the UK and internationally and talk of co-production is now replacing notions of involvement (Beresford, 2019), there is a need to further advance our theoretical and conceptual understanding of such involvement. A 'surface' consensus on the effectiveness of service user involvement, devoid of robust evidence regarding effects to student learning, and to the promotion of radical pedagogy and empowerment is not enough. This is particularly pertinent given the current political climate in the UK and internationally, whereby gains in the front of service user involvement can be quickly lost to austerity cuts within higher education institutions.

Limitations

Given that the evaluation of service user-led role-plays on social work student skills was secondary to the pedagogical aim of the role-plays, there are a number of inherent challenges. Firstly, it is small-scale and based on a single social work student cohort; we endeavor to repeat the evaluation with subsequent cohorts to see whether the

observed trends are reflective of a broader pattern. Also, there were some differences in when and how each participant group assessed role-play performance; it is possible that this variation may have influenced evaluation results (especially quantitative analysis). As the role-play was primarily an educational activity we were tied to the timings of the programme's existing pedagogical design, but future studies may benefit from greater parity across when and what is being evaluated, as well as a chance to evaluate the role-play exercise itself. It will also be of benefit for future research to measure student skill and confidence immediately before the first role-pay, as well as after it, to ascertain if and how student perceptions of their own performance change as a result of the role-play activity. It should also be stressed that we do not suggest a causal link between role-play activities and student skills; other educational activities during the 4 month period between the first and second role-plays have undoubtedly impacted on student skills. For the purposes of the evaluation, role-plays were a way to assess skill development. Lastly, how and to what extent the skills, which evidently developed in the classroom, can translate into students' practice placement performance remains unclear and requires further investigation (especially as practice goes beyond an initial assessment that was the focus of the role-plays, and because student/practitioner skills do not equate to their effectiveness).

Implications for social work education

A shift in focus from *skill assessment* to *skill development*, as has been the case with this evaluation, could yield important pedagogical knowledge in terms of service user-led role-plays and their effectiveness. Identifying the mechanisms by which students learn most effectively and progress is critical for enhancing our understanding of how to teach both 'hard' i.e. procedural and, more challengingly, the so-called 'soft skills' of social work. Furthermore, the plurality of assessor perspectives has been a significant strength in challenging our *de facto* acceptance of what 'skill improvement' means and opens up opportunities for further critical roles for service users in their educational role (for example, as assessors). Future plans include adapting the role-play activity for second and third-year students (as recommended by Skilton, 2011), addressing more complex practice scenarios (i.e. dealing with conflict, managing risk). This will target the development of procedural and meta-competencies across the continuum of professional skills (Bogo, Regehr, Logie et al., 2011), and allow for the assessment of student learning throughout a whole programme (Bogo, Regehr, Katz et al., 2011). Finally, future evaluations can target application and development of student professional skills during placement, contributing toward a more holistic understanding of the impact of service user-led educational activities to the practice of future practitioners.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

No financial interest or benefit has arisen from the direct application of this research. No conflict of interest was present in the study.

Funding

Notes on contributors

Eleni Skoura-Kirk is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Kent. She qualified as a Social Worker in Athens, Greece in 1994 and completed her PhD at the University of Kent in 2002. Her research focused on youth homelessness and social citizenship in the UK and Greece. She has worked in the field of homelessness in the late 1990s-mid 2000s and as a Lecturer in social work since 2006. Her pedagogical and research interests centre on service user and carer involvement in social work education, as well as applying and evaluating Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP) approaches in the classroom.

Sarah Brown is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Kent. She qualified as a social worker in 1999 from Cardiff University. She carried out her MA dissertation research project on the impact of gender on youth justice outcomes. She was employed as a social worker for 11 years in the field of youth justice but with more recent experience as a Family Group Conferencing Coordinator. Sarah started teaching for the Open University in 2007 and has over 10 years' experience as a Practice Educator. Her pedagogical and research interests relate to Readiness for Direct Practice and Family Group Conferencing.

Rasa Mikelyte is a Research Associate at the Centre for Health Services Studies at the University of Kent. She has a PhD in Social Policy, an MSc in Social and Applied Psychology, a BSc degree in Applied Psychology with Clinical Psychology, and a Postgraduate Certificate in Methods of Social Research; all at the University of Kent. Her principal research interests are in dementia care and policy, long-term care in later life, and end of life care. Her current research projects include a national evaluation of Hospice at Home services for end of life care in England, an evaluation of the New Models of Care national Vanguard programme, research on optimising the depression pathway enabled by novel digital assessment technology, perceptions of a good death among people living with dementia, and others. She has guest lectured on social work programmes since 2012.

References

Beresford, P. (2019). Public participation in health and social care: Exploring the co-production of knowledge. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *3*(41), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2018.00041

Beresford, P., & Boxall, K. (2012). Service users, social work education and knowledge for social work practice. *Social Work Education*, *31*(2), 155–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.644944

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Katz, E., Logie, C., & Mylopoulos, M. (2011). Developing a tool for assessing students' reflections on their practice. *Social Work Education*, *30*(2), 186–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2011.540392

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Logie, C., Katz, E., Mylopoulos, M., & Regehr, G. (2011). Adapting objective structured clinical examinations to assess social work students' performance and reflections. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *47*(1), 5–18. https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2011.200900036

British Association of Social Workers. (2018). *Professional Capabilities Framework*. BASW.

Cheung, M., & Dalavega, E. (2014). Five-way experiential learning model for social work education. *Social Work Education*, *33*(8), 1070–1087. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2014.925538

Department of Health. (2002). *Requirements for Social Work Training*. DoH.

Duffy, J., Das, C., & Davidson, D. (2013). Service user and carer involvement in role-plays to assess readiness for practice. *Social Work Education*, *32*(1), 39–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2011.639066

Hitchin, S. (2016). Role-played interviews with service users in preparation for social work practice: Exploring students' and service users' experience of co-produced workshops. *Social Work Education*, *35*(8), 970–981. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2016.1221393

Hughes, M. (2017). What difference does it make? Findings of an impact study of service user and carer involvement on social work students' subsequent practice. *Social Work Education*, *36*(2), 203–216. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2016.1274725

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lu, Y. A., Ain, E., Chamorro, C., Chang, C.-Y., Feng, J. Y., Fong, R., . . . Yu, M. (2011). A new methodology for assessing social work practice: The adaptation of the objective structured clinical evaluation (SW-OSCE). *Social Work Education*, *30*(2), 170–185. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2011.540385

McLeod, A. (2006). Respect or empowerment?: Alternative understandings of 'listening' in child-care social work. *Adoption and Fostering*, *30*(4), 43–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590603000407

Moss, B. R., Dunkerly, M., Price, B., Sullivan, W., Reynolds, M., & Yates, B. (2007). Skills laboratories and the new social work degree: One small step towards best practice? Service users' and carers' perspectives. *Social Work Education*, *26*(7), 708–722. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470601129925

Pearl, R., Williams, H., Williams, L., Brown, K., Brown, B., Hollington, L., . . . Statham, G. (2018). Service user and carer feedback: Simply pass/fail or a genuine learning tool? *Social Work Education*, *37*(5), 553–564. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1420768

Rhodes, C. A. (2012). User involvement in health and social care education: A concept analysis. *Nurse Education Today*, *32*(2), 185–189. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2011.11.012

Robinson, K., & Webber, M. (2013). Models and effectiveness of service user and carer involvement in social work education: A literature review. *British Journal of Social Work*, *43*(5), 925–944. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcs025

Sadd, J. (2011). *'We are more than our story: Service user and carer participation in social work education* (SCIE Report 42).SCIE.

Scourfield, J., Maxwell, N., Meng Le Zhang, M., de Villiers, T., Pithouse, A., Kinnersley, P., Metcalf, E., & Tayyaba, S. (2019). Evaluation of a fast-track postgraduate social work program in England using simulated practice. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *29*(4), 363–374. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731517735575

Shaping Our Lives, (2019). *Definitions and Meanings*. Retrieved 1st June 2019 from https://www.shapingourlives.org.uk/about/about-sol/definitions

Sheppard, M., & Charles, M. (2017). A longitudinal comparative study of the impact of the experience of social work education on interpersonal and critical thinking capabilities. *Social Work Education*, *36*(7), 745–757. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1355968

Skilton, K. J. (2011). Involving experts by experience in assessing students' readiness to practise: The value of experiential learning in student reflection and preparation for practice. *Social Work Education*, *30*(3), 299–311. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2010.482982

Social Care Institute for Excellence. (2009). *Building user and carer involvement in social work education*. SCIE.

Tanner, D., Littlechild, R., Duffy, J., & Hayes, D. (2017). 'Making it real': Evaluating the impact of service user and carer involvement in social work education. *British Journal of Social Work*, *47*(2), 467–486. https://doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcv121

The College of Social Work. (2014). *Practice Educator Professional Standards*. TCSW.

Tompsett, H., Henderson, K., Mathew Byrne, J., Gaskell Mew, E., & Tompsett, C. (2017). On the learning journey: What helps and hinders the development of social work students' core pre-placement skills? *Social Work Education*, *36*(1), 6–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2016.1249836

Wilson, G., & Kelly, B. (2010). Evaluating the effectiveness of social work education: Preparing students for practice learning. *British Journal of Social Work*, *40*(8), 2431–2449. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcq019

Woodcock Ross, J. (2016). *Specialist Communication Skills for Social Workers: Developing Professional Capability* (2nd ed.). Palgrave.