Mark My Words! Service User and Carer Involvement in Social Work Academic Assessment

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This paper discusses the involvement of service users in academic assessment as part of a second year module for social work undergraduate students at Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK. The three main tasks undertaken in partnership are detailed: designing an assessment form, assessment of student group presentations and assessment of a written reflective essay. The paper starts by identifying key questions raised by the assessor team before providing a critical commentary on the process, and identifying challenges and learning points. The experience emphasises the need for a more critical and searching approach towards service user involvement in social work education in academic assessment. Moreover, the team's experience suggests that such work is best achieved in the context of collaborative working relationships based on trust, with opportunities for team reflection and supported by training in academic assessment.

Keywords: Assessment; Service User Involvement; Social Work Education; Service User Assessor; Service User Educator; Reflection; Assessing Reflection

Introduction

The requirements by the Department of Health and the General Social Care Council in England clearly highlight service user involvement as a key component of social work education at all levels (Department of Health, 2002). Together, the *Requirements for*

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Social Work Training, issued under the Care Standards Act (2000), *National Occupational Standards* (TOPSS, 2002), *Professional Codes of Practice* (General Social Care Council, 2002) and *Benchmark Statement for Social Work* [Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2008] form the framework for assessing student social workers. The Benchmark statements are unambiguous in promoting service user involvement as part of social work education (see QAA, 2008, 5.1.1, 5.1.4, 5.1.5). Current proposed changes to social work reiterate this, stating that: '. . . service users and carers should be consistently and substantially involved in the design and delivery of courses' (HM Government, 2010, 2.15). Nationally, service user involvement is embedded in numerous aspects of social work educational programmes, primarily teaching planning and delivery, admissions and preparation for practice education (Allain *et al.*, 2006; Baldwin and Sadd, 2006; Beresford *et al.*, 2006; Brown and Young, 2008; O'Connor *et al.*, 2009).

An area that is not so well developed is that of academic assessment. The growing involvement of various stakeholders in the social work student assessment process has been highlighted by Crisp *et al.* (2006). These include academics from other disciplines, practice teachers, students (peer assessment) and service users. They found that service users were primarily linked with assessing student practice learning. Other work supports this long-standing link (for example Baird, 1990; Shennan, 1998; Edwards, 2003; Advocacy in Action *et al.*, 2006). A recent report on service user and carer involvement in social work education again links assessment involvement to practice (Sadd, 2011).

However, the involvement of service users in activities relating to academic assessment of social work students is less evident. There is a current and strong focus on assessment and feedback with many educational researchers and academics emphasising its centrality to the higher education student experience (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The Benchmark statements for social work outline assessment approaches that 'enhance students' abilities to conceptualise, compare and analyse issues, in order to be able to apply this in making professional judgements' (QAA, 2008, 6.8). By academic assessment we mean tasks that are undertaken as part of a taught module and can be in formative (ongoing and developmental) or summative (final, time-limited) modes (Parker and Bradley, 2003). The methods of assessing students' academic work are varied, including written assignments, individual or group presentations, posters and case studies. Given the growing importance of service user discourses as part of social work education, their absence from assessment of academic work does not sit comfortably.

Background Information

Following from the above considerations, our team at Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK decided to work on involving service users and carers in the academic assessment of a BA second year module, titled 'Citizens, Service Provision and Society'. The module aimed to provide the students with a deeper understanding of the lived experience of service users and carers, anti-oppressive practice and power in the social worker–service user relationship.

The assessment of the module included two components: a group presentation (focusing on presenting issues affecting the lived experience of one service user group) and a reflective essay (discussing the way in which the students' understanding around a service user group changed during the course of the module). Both assessment elements were deemed to be relevant to service user experiences and as such appropriate for collaborative work. University regulations meant that such involvement could not be formal, i.e. granting service users with the power to allocate final marks. This embodies one of the well-known tensions in service user involvement in higher education, namely barriers to service users being involved versus safeguarding quality assurance for the students (Wright *et al.*, 2006; Branfield *et al.*, 2007). This barrier and dilemma was commented upon by Louise:

> It still feels somewhat on the periphery of the "partnership" where marking/assessing cannot yet take place by a service user where it forms part of the final mark for students even though you might feel influential. Can a service user not also be an academic with this authority given appropriate training and guidance for quality assurance?

However, this did not stop us from—at this stage—involving the individuals as contributors, whose input would be taken into account in the discussion of the mark. It also signalled the beginning of long-term work, aiming at formalising such involvement, and developing skills, knowledge and experience for all concerned.

Our team comprised of three academics (Eleni, Bob C. and Jane) and four service users (Gerry, Dawn, Bob B. and Louise), who between them had long-term experiences of various services, including mental health services, physical disability support and supported housing. The four service users also had extensive experience of involvement at various levels of service design, evaluation and provision, as well as involvement in educational activities (i.e. direct teaching). We were also all involved in the design and delivery of the module, with various teaching sessions co-facilitated by an academic and one or more service users. As such, the students were familiar with the service users and were informed of their role as assessors at various stages of the module.

A set of values and ideological positions underpinned our overall approach from the outset [the whole-systems approach advocated by Wright *et al.* (2006); see also Kirby *et al.* (2003)]. Arnstein's ladder of participation is a well-used model of conceptualising different levels of involvement (Arnstein, 1969) ranging from non-participation (i.e. citizen manipulation) to tokenism (i.e. consultation) to citizen power (i.e. partnership and citizen control). Biggs (1989, cited in Rowe, 2006) describes four levels (contractual, consultative, collaborative and collegiate).The overall consensus of such models is that there are different levels of involvement, pointing towards a greater sharing of power at the higher ends of the ladder. The work undertaken at Canterbury Christ Church University has been informed by a subscription to higher levels of involvement, aiming for a partnership [or alliance, as argued by Baldwin and Sadd (2006, p. 349)] of shared decision making. To put this into practice, we worked together on the basis of regular meetings, debates on key elements of the process and mutually agreed minutes.

We have also enacted this ideology in evaluating the work and producing this paper. The structure and key messages of the paper were decided via face-to-face and email discussions; on top of that, as part of the evaluation of the work, individual reflective narratives were produced by all the members of the team. This paper aims to capture the process as well as the reflective engagement with the task in hand and to contribute to the ongoing debates surrounding service user involvement in social work education. By incorporating individual reflection (in the form of quotes and text) and by adopting a collaborative approach to the production of the paper (including co-authorship) we have tried to address power imbalances and potential 'silencing' of service user perspectives (see Beresford and Boxall, 2012).

It is important to acknowledge at this point the absence of the voice of the students in this paper. As the 'recipients' of this work and the subjects of the academic assessment, their feedback is of paramount significance. This is work to be undertaken in the near future, potentially taking the form of a structured evaluation of the work and/or a response paper to this current one.

Ideological Underpinnings and Dilemmas

A number of dilemmas and reflections informed our initial approach to this work and remained relevant throughout the life of this project. The team early on engaged with the issue of the absence of service users and carers as assessors of academic work. As one of the service user assessors commented in relation to the preoccupation with and overreliance on users' stories within the classroom:

> Why is it that the uptake of the more openly emotive delivery of life experience is more readily accepted in teaching delivery, than service user/carer involvement in structured academic assessment? (Gerry)

This runs the risk of dividing up practice and academic learning as two distinct activities. It can also confine service users and carers to one type of involvement, but exclude their input in other key dimensions of social work education. This goes against the requirements for social work education set out by the Department of Health and can also lead to a loss of potentially great benefits for students. Even though the evidence base is still developing (Taylor and Le Riche, 2006), service user involvement is widely held as an educational experience valued by students (Waterson and Morris, 2005; Sadd, 2011). The benefits of such involvement can potentially have a transformative effect on students' preconceptions, value base and understanding of lived experience (Frisby, 2001; Rush, 2008). It can also benefit service users and carers themselves, by building capacity, skills and confidence (Felton and Stickley, 2004; Pendred and Chettle, 2006; Brown and Young, 2008).

Yet, it is also the case that students feel nervous about being assessed by service users and carers. Students could be reluctant to accept other forms of teaching input from service users, apart from them sharing their personal stories (Gregor and Smith, 2009, p. 24) and they can even oppose or dismiss assessment input by service users, especially

when linked to unfavourable feedback (Stickley *et al.*, 2010). This is a need highlighted by our group experience too:

> Students may need reassuring as to what service users expect from the student in terms of how they award marks or make assessments. (Bob B.)

> The challenge to power and societal roles creates an uncertainty which makes both procedure and protocol development [in academic assessment] new for all. (Gerry)

The team were concerned with ensuring quality for the students; novel approaches to academic assessment need to be accompanied by academic rigour, clarity in terms of the assessment task, suitability of task to level of study and competent assessors. The difficulties present in such types of involvement were acknowledged and indeed we debated whether academic assessment is the best forum for developing service user involvement. Positive elements of such involvement were highlighted:

> . . . Being in this role in assessment is not the same to that of a Student/Service User in placement, as the power differential is different [. . .] being a service user with a practitioner/student in a practice setting, a lot of my confidence to challenge the system/question my care, goes . . . . (Dawn)

> Service user involvement can create opportunity for learning, as well as challenges to academic practice and perceptions of power. (Gerry)

Relating to the specific task of assessment and the effective involvement of service users, we had to address a number of considerations. Are particular aspects of the academic assessment more suited to assessment by service users (i.e. students' values, use of language, rather than use of literature)? Furthermore, is assessment by service users better suited to particular assessment formats (i.e. group presentations, rather than marking academic essays)? In our approach, we set out to 'test' two modes of assessment, namely service users being involved in group presentations and reflective essays, as both were referring to service user perspectives and experience.

Another key consideration relates to who should or could be included in such involvement work. Should academic assessment be an activity open to all service users? If not, should there be a 'selection' process, on the grounds of quality assurance [echoing the 'pyramid' model of service user involvement, as argued by Stevens and Tanner (2006, p. 365)]? If so, who should establish criteria for inclusion (and exclusion) of service users and relevant tasks? Could this perpetuate a top-down approach to service user involvement in social work education, an academic-led activity?

Further linked to the need for quality assurance and student benefit is the need for training for service user educators (Branfield and Beresford, 2006); what form should it take when it comes to service user involvement in academic assessment? Finally, what wider lessons could be learned around the boundaries/limitations of service user involvement?

Implementation

A small group of service users, already known to the social work department via previous involvement, was recruited for this work. This ensured that trusting relationships and

mutual knowledge of each other pre-existed. Arguably, such a small group, recruited via existing contacts, runs the risk of unrepresentativeness, or of replicating the tendency to rely on the 'usual suspects' (McLaughlin, 2009, p. 1107). Nevertheless, as members of the group have argued: 'Not being able to "tick all the boxes" in terms of representativeness does not negate useful import of experiences/judgment of students' (Bob B.). The group recognised strengths in their make-up, especially the diverse experiences of its members, which can promote self-reflection:

> We must understand that we as service users can be constrained by our own specific and consequently limited experiences. But these can be augmented by peers' experiences and outcomes. (Bob B.)

The work was part funded by the General Social Care Council's funding to pre-registration social work programmes to secure service user involvement. We met on nine occasions over a nine-month period to develop the module's assessment. Payment for attendance and work produced was provided to the service users, on the basis of a payment policy agreed at faculty level.

The meetings were decided and organised as we went along, to meet the needs of the work. This was not always convenient for all and raises the question of keeping such work flexible, responsive to emerging momentum, whilst also ensuring accessibility and inclusivity:

> Although I was able to attend some meetings, there were quite a lot that were spread out over a period of months where I inevitably couldn't attend due to holidays or work commitments. Even though you keep in touch via notes, e-mails, minutes of meetings/summaries etc., it does alter how you fit back in if you then rejoin later. (Louise)

Work Undertaken: Detailing the Process

Three main tasks were undertaken as part of the module assessment work: the design of an assessment form for the group presentations, the assessment of the group presentations and the assessment of the reflective essays.

(a) Designing an Assessment Form for the Student Group Presentations

The initial thinking around service user involvement in assessment included the need to clarify the role of service users in the process. This was so that tokenism and poor practice would be avoided, namely involving service users without prior consideration of their role, the particular benefits/expertise that they could bring into the assessment process, their training needs. The complexity of the role of service user as educator has been highlighted by Gregor and Smith (2009):

> . . . [the service users'] identity can be confusing for all parties, for they are neither a full time service user, nor social worker, nor full-time lecturer. This "either/or/neither/nor" can be projected on to the student group who may also become confused as to what role the service user is fulfilling. (Gregor and Smith, 2009, p. 27)

It was, thus, important to establish why service users should be involved in assessment; in what way would their contribution be different/complementary to the assessment conducted by academics? How could we ensure involvement that would benefit all affected, i.e. students, service users and lecturers?

There are some points here that need attention—one course of action could involve selecting service users who have academic skills themselves. Arguably, this can promote good practice, i.e. a service user who has personal experience of higher education (for example by having a first degree, some knowledge of the relevant literature) could be assumed to have better skills in academic assessment. Indeed, almost all of the service users in our team had at least a first degree. However, this can raise a number of ethical and value-based issues. There is a risk of minimising the value of experiential knowledge (Cotterell and Morris, 2012). Also, such an approach can potentially exclude significant numbers of service users and carers. One has to reflect on whether 'mini versions' of academics are required or indeed a clearly debated and articulated role for social work educators/assessors, based on their expertise and life experiences. A concern related to this is the need to avoid duplication of task or compromising the quality of assessment.

The above dilemmas and ideas were critically debated by the team. In particular, this compartmentalisation of people's experiences and identities was seen as problematic by Louise:

> What we are assuming is that we have two groups of people. Service users who might inform the university in a more academic way because of their academic skills and those who inform from "expert by experience" not having had a university education. From that—the latter may be perceived as more desirable by the academic world [less powerful, more likely to give something that is different to what regular lecturers can provide (experience of using services) and more readily accessible to people with a range of impairments and carers etc.]. In fact this could be seen as compartmentalizing people and failing to see their whole identity as people where one aspect of their lives might have shaped others and can't be separated.

Training was also considered by other members of the team as of paramount importance in equipping service users for the assessment role:

> When discussing designing an assessment form for group presentations, it soon became clear that being able to understand how academia functions and assesses is fundamental to the process. Training around these issues is very important, more important than previous experience of academic study. (Dawn)

Furthermore, the literature indicates that service users want to have an effect on the values and skills of social work students (Baldwin and Sadd, 2006). This was also present in the team:

> We want to try to identify and nurture empathy in social work students—empathy, not sympathy. (Bob B.)

Informed by the above considerations, we initially embarked on designing a service user form to assess the student group presentations, separate to the one used by academic staff. However, whilst working on the different categories to be included in

the form and through discussions in meetings, we realised that such a distinction was, in practice, artificial and unworkable. Many elements were overlapping; for example, presentation skills (engagement with the audience, use of resources, group cohesion) can be assessed by all. Use of language, application of values and knowledge around a service user group can similarly be the subject of assessment for all. One aspect that remains the topic of debate relates to assessing the literature, the existing body of knowledge on a subject. Different viewpoints still exist in the group around this and we will revisit this point later on in this paper.

As such the service user form that was designed ended up being the new one for everyone to use. The wording of categories was carefully selected to allow clarity for the students and transparency as to how they would be assessed.

(b) Assessment of Student Group Presentations

Following from the above, service users were involved in the assessment of student group presentations. Two service users were available for both days of the presentations, alongside two academics. The students had met the service users on two of the module teaching sessions; the service users had discussed their personal experiences with services, as well as their involvement with social work educational programmes. Moreover, together with the module leader, they had explained their role in assessing the group presentations and enabled discussion with the student group. The new assessment form had been presented and discussed in class in advance. The two service users had also met the two academic markers in previous meetings and explored the way in which the joint marking could take place.

The experience of assessing the student group presentations was described as enjoyable by Dawn:

> The actual process of assessing the group presentations felt very relaxed as we had previously met the students by talking to them on the module. Watching the presentations was very interesting, everyone seemed at ease and the whole process of making notes on a pre-agreed form then coming to a group mark was very straightforward.

Central to the assessment process was the use of questioning and critical dialogue following each student group presentation. This enabled students' interpersonal and presentation skills to be further tested. The team was assessing work presented in person by groups of students. As such the exchange was immediate and interactive in the form of questions which clearly does not feature when marking anonymous essays. By asking the students questions, it was possible to use their responses to assess their knowledge base and degree of subject awareness, unpack their understanding of the learning outcomes as well as their connection to the issues that they had selected:

> The group task and presentations lead to a personalisation and a reflection on potential social work practice which gave a more emotional experience of assessment. (Gerry)

(c) Assessment of Reflective Essays

At the design stage of the module it was thought that this part of the module assessment would be a formative task, i.e. not resulting in a final mark and including regular feedback for the students, especially from the service users (McIntosh *et al.*, 2007). It was thought that such work could take place by using virtual learning environments, for example online forums, or wikis (Bye *et al.*, 2009). However, due to time constraints and work volume, this was not implemented in the first year. Instead, we approached this task as a developmental exercise, allowing the service users to build their experience of marking a written piece of work. It was also a useful developmental undertaking for the teaching staff in building partnership skills and relevant experience.

As such, the service user assessors each reviewed the same three essays, which had been awarded different percentage grades within the marking scale (a distinction, a pass and a fail). They then provided informal written feedback to the module team (but not the students), which was subsequently discussed at a meeting and via email.

A number of challenges faced the group. The first was around shared understanding in assessing the reflective essay. Reflection is an elusive concept, it can mean different things to different people and as such there is the risk that students, as well as assessors, will have different views on it. As Boud highlights, there may be a tension between assessment and reflection: 'assessment involves emphasizing what one knows. Reflection on the other hand, is about exploration, focusing on a lack of understanding ...' (Boud, 1999, p. 123). Equally, writing reflectively is, in some respects, a task that challenges students and raises their anxieties around its formal assessment; this has led some to argue that we should move away from a formal assessment of reflection and replace it with small group work and reflective dialogue (Stewart and Richardson, 2000). The personal nature of reflection can also create pressures to disclose poor practice or incompetence, or personal feelings, which again can compound the sense of unease for students (Fook and Askeland, 2007).

Given these concerns, a number of steps were taken. First, our team discussed the concept of reflection, the way each one of us defined and conceptualised it. This was a challenging task:

> I often felt that understanding the need for reflection in social work seemed like a Holy Grail that I wasn't quite going to be able to attain. The thought of looking for it in academic essays when it seemed mercurial, was in itself very daunting. Searching through essays for it and then measuring felt almost impossible. (Dawn)

Second, we discussed and adopted the four-category scheme suggested by Kember *et al.* (2008). This approach outlines four categories of reflection, namely habitual action/non-reflection, understanding, reflection and critical reflection. As such, we had a tool whereby judgments around depth and criticality of the written essays could be made transparent, both for markers and students. The four-category scheme was also adapted by Jane as a separate category in the university's formal marking criteria for year two work, thereby providing further clarity (see Table 1).

In preparation for the task we discussed at length what would constitute the threshold for a bare pass or a fail. It is, arguably, easier to judge a clear distinction,

Table 1   Proposed Marking Model for the Essays (Based on Kember *et al.*'s Four Categories of Reflection).

Level of reflection	Habitual action	Understanding	Reflection	Critical reflection
Mark (for that portion of the mark which gives credit for reflection)	Below 50%	50−59%	60−69%	70% and above
Kember *et al.* suggest there are also transitional categories in-between the four main ones, which would fill out the full range of marks	A procedure is followed without significant thought about it; could be related to surface learning	Evidence of trying to reach an understand-ing of a concept or topic; related to deep learning, but not necessarily to reflection. The concepts are not related to per-sonal experience, and as such, knowledge retention can be short	A concept is taken and related to personal experience. In writing, theories will be explained in relevance to personal experience	Evidence of undergoing a transformation of perspective; critical review of presuppositions from conscious and unconscious prior learning

Source: Kember *et al.* (2008).

or a clear fail; however, the essays that are borderline pass or fail pose a challenge, not only for the service user assessors, but for the teaching staff as well:

> In order to assess the reflective essays, a four-category scheme was used. This was very hard to apply and distinguish between different levels of attainment. A singular personal mark on reflection was harder for me to do, particularly when it was not totally clear, i.e. a borderline pass and being aware of the impact this could have on a student. (Dawn)

> Often, when you mark, you come across essays that are borderline and have to work closely with the learning outcomes and marking criteria to base your final decision. This is particularly difficult when judging a reflective essay that includes personal thoughts and disclosures. (Eleni)

There was more marked disagreement between members of the group around the quality of one particular essay and divergence in terms of proposed marks (10−20% difference). The group debated the ability and role of service users in assessing the literature content of the essays, and how well students knew and applied such literature. Some felt that they could not comment or assess that, whilst others argued that one could have a view on its application. Service users put in a lot of time and effort to assess these essays and produced high quality written feedback. We commented on the different experience between service users and lecturers as assessors, with the latter only having time to read an essay once, given the volume of marking and turnaround deadlines.

In our discussions, there was a tendency for service users and academics to adopt slightly different viewpoints, i.e. the former advocating for a stricter approach to marking, compared to the latter. This debate pointed towards a wider discussion on educational approaches to assessment, i.e. do you expect the students to have existing knowledge, skills and values, or is it the educator's role to harness and nurture that? Especially in the context of social work, what is the balance one needs to strike?

Overall, the experience of marking reflective essays was seen as more difficult and challenging for the group:

> Being involved in assessing the reflective essays was much more difficult. This was for a number of reasons. The essay is a much more formal process and seems more academic in nature with references to social work studies and theory and it was unclear how much we were to judge the academic content. [. . .] I found to be able to assess reflection and to quantify what it was very hard. I have concluded that in order to do this, you need to have developed some self-reflective skills in life and be able to be anti-discriminatory, balanced and be aware of any personal agendas you may have. (Dawn and Gerry)

Conclusions

Social work is an applied academic subject that has a distinctive focus on practice and as such is predicated upon partnerships with, among others, service users (QAA, 2008, 4.1). Furthermore, learning processes in social work focus on areas such as acquisition of knowledge alongside practice skills and reflection (QAA, 2008, 6.2). Similarly, service users expect social workers to have in-depth knowledge of the individuals, families, carers, groups and communities they work with and recognise their expertise (NOS, TOPSS, 2002, p. 4). It is for these very reasons—the link between the experiential and the theoretical—that assessment by service users and carers is of such value; it may help us to find more effective ways of joining the two approaches, which is a benchmark of academic education, as opposed to simple training, of social workers.

Overall, the work undertaken by the group has been stimulating, informative and challenging. As it has followed an 'organic' process of development, including debates, changes of plan and a step-by-step approach, it is in no way concluded. Rather, this work is seen as part of a long-term plan to develop and embed service user involvement in assessment activities, both classroom and practice based. Nevertheless, some practical outcomes have also been achieved, namely the development of educational tools, such as a common group presentation assessment form and a reflection marking scheme that is informed by both theory and service user feedback. In that respect, some progress was achieved in bringing together academic with user and carer knowledge (SCIE, 2003).

A key part of the team's reflections relates to the overall educational experience and potential achievements of service user role as an educator and assessor. One could argue that there is a lack of critical debate surrounding this role, its manifestation and the challenges it poses for all affected by it (i.e. service users, lecturers, academics, students, as well as wider stakeholders).

For example, a dilemma that we faced and debated at length related to the accessibility of this role. Should it be open to all service users, or is there justification for a selection process of those who are better placed to fulfil the responsibilities of this role? There are arguments for both positions, even within our own team; we should approach selection processes with caution, as they could perpetuate segregation and silencing of alternative voices:

> Within social work education will only the "safe" perspectives be incorporated, avoiding or neutralising the more political messages from service user groups? (Cairney *et al.*, 2006, p. 317)

In that respect, the power element in the collaborative relationship would remain with academic staff, prohibiting development of work that reaches the higher levels of the participation ladder. At the same time though, the issues of quality assurance, student rights and effective assessment processes cannot be overlooked. The educational role of service users bestows powers that need to be approached with a sense of responsibility and fairness; in essence, the expectations can be similar to that of any other teaching staff. In the team's experience, significant deviations were noted in terms of essay marks, potentially disadvantaging the students had the role been formal. As such, the service users in our team felt that there is justification for a selection process that ensures that students receive a good 'service', are assessed fairly and have a positive educational experience. Any such selection should be transparent in its ideological basis and criteria and shared between academics and service users. The QAA mentions 'competent assessors' when assessing activities bearing academic credit (2008, 4.5) (rather than using a word such as 'qualified' that could indicate a more narrow focus). As such, a mutually agreed definition of what 'competent' denotes could form part of the planning of such involvement (i.e. is prior academic experience essential? Is current experience of service provision required? Could training for the role lead to 'competency'?). Furthermore, following from the official aims and benchmarks for social work education, one needs to establish ways in which assessment serves its purpose and indeed measures if the desired learning outcomes have been achieved. In this process, service users can be collaborators and valuable contributors in enhancing the knowledge, skills base and reflection ability of the students. In our experience, this was addressed firstly by building a relationship between academics and service users (partnership values, flexible approach, ability to be critically engaging with each other) as well as a relationship between the student group and the service user educators (presence in the class, clarity of role, constant dialogue). We also strived to establish clarity regarding the assessment approach and tools, by having a clear theoretical educational base for our marking.

On a more general note, there is a need to critically debate the educational role of service users, to 'flesh out' the role and its requirements. As part of this work we reflected on the particular characteristics and responsibilities that the role entails. For example, are service users complimenting the input of academics? Are they best suited to helping students to link theory to practice and develop professional skills and values? In our team, we established common assessment tools, finding it unworkable to segregate assessment areas better suited to the experiential knowledge of service users. The only area where this could be justified related to the assessment of literature

knowledge and application, a task perhaps exclusively akin to assessment by academics. Even though it can be artificial to separate areas of learning (i.e. knowledge, skills, values), work could be done on how diverse assessment areas can be better suited to the existing skills and expertise of service users (i.e. policy impact on someone's life, living with a condition day-to-day, experience of exclusion and discrimination). Such feedback can potentially bridge the gap between theory and practice, by bringing abstract concepts 'to life'.

Linked to the above is the question around service user involvement in particular modes of assessment. Assessment tasks focusing on service user perspectives and experiences seemed to link well to the role of service user assessor. As mentioned, reflective essays presented a challenge; even though work had been undertaken in clarifying some of the key concepts, differing approaches were noted in marking the essays. At this early stage and with only our own experience as the basis of the discussion, one cannot draw concrete conclusions on why this might be; however, the need for more extensive preparatory work for service users is highlighted.

We are avoiding the word 'training' here, as it can denote a 'top-down' relationship, a need to 'educate' service users to play a role according to how things are done. Even though elements of training and 'education' are inherent and necessary in work of this type (recognising academic expertise, student needs and external regulations), the innovative potential of service user involvement should not be overshadowed. Learning takes place on both sides (academics and service users), especially in an underdeveloped area, such as service user involvement in academic assessment:

> Service user involvement in social work education can be innovative and groundbreaking regarding what we understand by "knowledge". It can challenge all those involved, it can affect the value and skill base of the students. Personally, I have found it a challenging and creative process, and have gained insights regarding my own educational role. (Eleni)

So, what are the wider lessons learnt from our experience around service user involvement? Firstly, there is a need for an expansion of the evidence base around the effectiveness of the service user educator role. Is it really achieving what service users want to achieve, i.e. challenging stereotypes as well as creating better practitioners for the future? Is it meeting the needs of the future workforce and employers? Research and evaluation work needs to be established in our educational practices and collaborative work to be able to build our knowledge base and develop innovative and beneficial education. Moreover, the involvement of service users in social work education raises challenges that can lead to a reconfiguration of our given ideas around knowledge, teaching and learning and the wider role of an 'educator'. This is by no means an easy task and as such our group advocates a critical engagement with this new role, rather than tokenistic or 'rushed' approaches to its implementation. Key to the development of this critical approach is the ability to be reflective and self-aware; this is not only confined to academics, but also to service users. The ability to critically evaluate one's skills, role, input and motivation is seen as crucial by our team in advancing meaningful and effective service user involvement in social work education. This is especially pertinent given the current sweeping changes in the fields of social work, higher education and government policy.

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