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HOW CAN TECHNOLOGY HELP SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS TO LEARN ABOUT WORKING WITH EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE?

Angie BOYLE
University of Cumbria

ABSTRACT: Biggs (1999) constructive alignment theory describes total synergy in the teaching and learning activities that we use namely: the curriculum itself, the environment in which students learn, the teaching methods and assessment processes. Within UK social work education the Standards for Education and Training as outlined by the regulatory body the Health and Care Professions Council (2009: 31) state: 3.17 Service users and carers must be involved in the programme. This paper will concentrate upon how the approach to course design and delivery has changed within the BA and MA Social Work programmes at The University of Cumbria (UoC) to become a more collaborative and inclusive process. In particular this paper will focus upon how the use of technology has assisted the effective delivery of the UoC's Working with Experts by Experience module. This module is designed and delivered by service users and carers and co-facilitated by the social work course team. The module provides opportunities for students to work alongside a variety of service users and carers, in a variety of ways, in order to both understand the range of complexities within the relationship between social work professionals and user groups, and to embed the need for service users and carers to be at the centre of all professional activity and decision making. Reference will be made to the use of podcasts, video, digital narratives and the use of online learning environments.

Key words: Expert by experience, social work education, technology.

INTRODUCTION

Social work education in the UK has always encouraged the meaningful inclusion of Service Users and Carers i.e. those who currently receive, or have received social care services in the past and those that care for them. The regulatory body, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) state in their Standards for Education and Training (SETs) (3.8 and 3.9) that resources must be appropriate for the teaching and used in an effective manner (2009: 23-24). Within social work education specifically it is vital that people's experiences of services are captured in as diverse way as possible. This maximizes the capacity for people to be involved in a number of creative ways to suits their needs. It is not always appropriate to simply have a person present in a large classroom of students whom they have never met: this can be an intimidating and frightening experience for someone who may still be vulnerable and in need. Technology allows us to capture someone's lived experience in a medium that is meaningful for them, accessible for their needs and appropriate to the message they wish to present.

Aim

The Working with Experts by Experience module ran for the first time in the academic year 2013-14. The module is collaborative in nature with the entire content being populated by Experts by Experience. The module takes place in year one, runs for 12 weeks and draw upon a range of service user and carer experiences and life stories in a range of formats so as to maximize potential involvement according to individual needs and wishes of the individual. Some of the different ways technology assists in the module is by the production and utilization of videos, audio podcasts, written narrative work and our online virtual learning environment (VLE). The idea was to combine the involvement of actual recipients of social care, via the use of different forms of technology, to promote and encourage the reflective development of the students and embed this reflective practice early on in their career. Schon (1983) is widely accepted to be one of the major proponents of reflective practice. He was actively concerned with a practitioner's ability to reflect on their actions both in the moment of the actual interaction but also in their consideration of the event after it had occurred.

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*Corresponding author: Angie BOYLE- icemstoffice@gmail.com

In social work reflective practice has become the “signature pedagogy” (Shulman 2005b, p.9 cited in Trowler and Wareham 2013) and for me is the golden thread which links all aspects of a social workers’ practice.

METHODS

This study was carried out using an action research approach. Jean McNiff (2002) states:

Action research is open ended. It does not begin with a fixed hypothesis. It begins with an idea that you develop. The research process is the developmental process of following through the idea, seeing how it goes, and continually checking whether it is in line with what you wish to happen. Seen in this way, action research is a form of self-evaluation. It is used widely in professional contexts such as appraisal, mentoring and self-assessment.

Brown and Jones (2001) however are critical of the action based approach asking how can we as participant researchers effectively reflect upon our work when our world view, language and meaning is in constant motion? They call for a post-structuralist approach in which we reflect on how our realities are constructed, asserting that a unidirectional call for ‘reflective practitioners’ is not, in itself, sufficient.

However I concur with Mayes and Freitas (2005) who describe a ‘constructivist pedagogical approach’, which concentrates upon what the student is actually doing: and which places the learning and teaching activities (TLAs) at the heart of the process. Biggs’ constructive alignment theory has a constructivist approach at its very heart. Gardner (2014, p.7) bridges the perceived gap that Brown and Jones (2001) indicated above, she advocates:

Being critically reflective as an attitude of mind as well as doing critical reflection.

I am not suggesting a dichotomy here of being critically reflective versus doing...the aim is to combine both.

Recruitment for this action research was sought from the BA Social Work 2013-14 students who were the first cohort to participate in the Working with Experts by Experience module at the University of Cumbria. Students were asked to volunteer. From a total number of 45 students, 13 came forward as potential participants with 11 completing the questionnaires, indicating an 84.6% response rate.

Measures

A 14 item Bristol Online Survey (BOS) based questionnaire was used in this study. Respondents were posed a number of questions or statements and asked to rate their response according to a Likert Scale of 5 possible answers: strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, and strongly agree (Social Research Methods, 2014). In addition there were asked to add any further comments on a number of the items.

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Procedural and Ethical Considerations

There are a number of procedural and ethical considerations that must be explored. McDonald (1999), cited in Orme and Shemmings (2010, p.23) ask the researcher to consider potential oppression of ‘the researcher or the researched’. McDonald (ibid) calls for clarity in the value base of the research project and ‘robustness’. However ‘robustness’ is a contested concept. Beresford (2000) discusses the complexities of social research as being problematic from an evidence based practice perspective due to the inherent ethical value base of the researcher. Macdonald and Sheldon (1998) cited in Webber (2015), acknowledge that ‘evidenced-based approaches to social work can be challenging to achieve’. However Macdonald (2003: 5) also cited in Webber (2015), states:

Different people will make different decisions. This is fine as long as it is clear to the reader what decisions have been made...so that they can make an informed decision about relevance

This brings me to consider my own ethics and values as the author of this research and the ‘cognitive biases that might lead me astray’ (Gambrill, 2011: 29 as cited in Webber 2015: 81). Having previously been trained as a person-centered counsellor and being a firm believer in personal and professional development I have been aware of making several assumptions at the outset. My hunches included:

- That the EbE module has aided the reflective ability of the students
- That the EbE module has challenged the students’ values and ethics

There is an inherent incongruence in researching the effects of the Expert by Experience upon the students and the ethos of the module itself which seeks input and collaboration with EbE at every level as EbE were not included in this piece of action research:

Both the process of social work/ care research, including choice of methodology, and the use to which any findings might be put, should be congruent with the aims and values of social work practice and, where possible, seek to empower service users, promote their welfare and improve their access to economic and social capital on equal terms with other citizens. (Joint University Council, 2015: 1)

RESULTS and FINDINGS

In total 11 out of 13 students who initially volunteered to take part in the research project completed the online survey. This gives a response rate of 84.6%. Of the 13 who volunteered 3 were male and 10 female. Ages ranged between early twenties to early 50's. The survey was available for students to complete between the 4th and the 12th December 2014.

The first 4 questions asked the students to retrospectively think back to before they started the social work course as to how reflective (Q1), tolerant and accepting a person they thought they were (Q2), if they spend much time considered why they acted a certain way or thought certain things (Q3) and if they felt they had dealt with any personal issues from the past (Q4).

Although 63.6% of students felt they were already reflective people prior to the module, 100% of students felt they were more reflective after their engagement with the module.

Prior to the module 81.8% of students felt they were tolerant and non-discriminatory in their practice, this rose to 90.9% of students post module.

27.3% of students felt they didn't spend much time thinking about why they thought or acted in certain ways prior to the commencement of the module however 100% of students felt they had become more aware of this post module. Prior to the module 45.5% of students felt that they had dealt with any personal issues from the past but as a result of their engagement with the module 90.9% of students became more aware of having personal issues which would still need to be resolved in order to become a more effective social worker (Fig. 1).

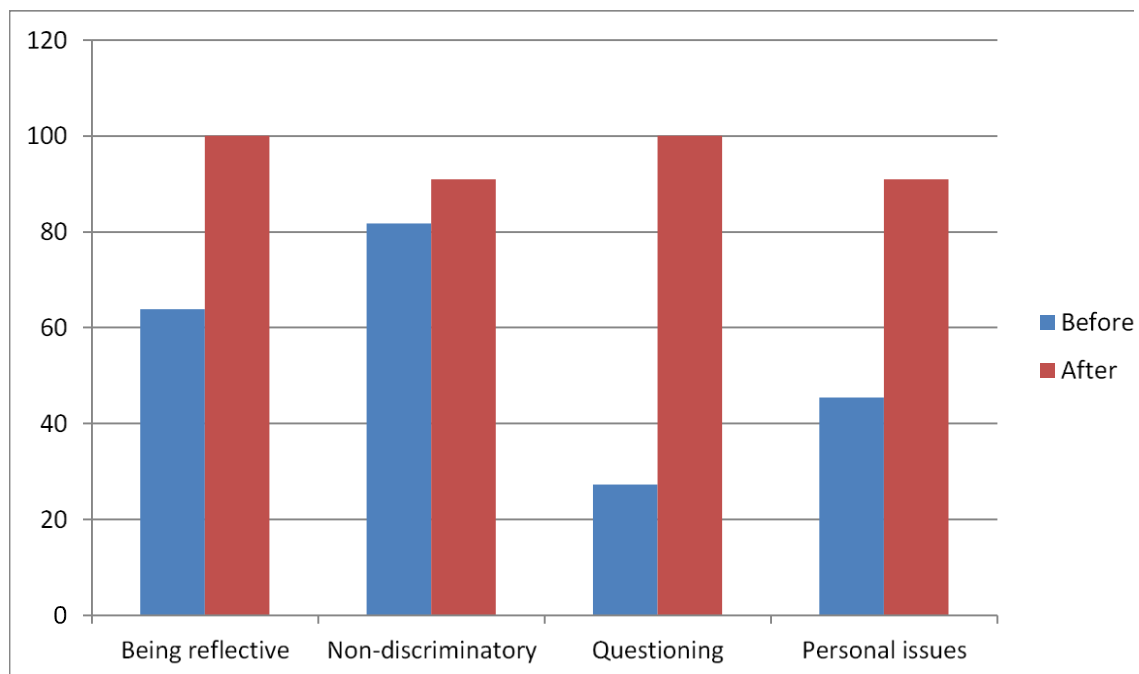


Figure 1. Student Evaluation of Module Impact

Student Comments on Use of Technology

*The recordings that X allowed us to listen to; I found to be very engaging and thought provoking. Previous to these recordings I knew very little about Schizophrenia and the way they made me empathise and gain more of an insight into this illness was brilliant. The fact that these were recorded daily allowed me to understand the 'rollercoaster' of emotions X can feel on a daily basis
I found them a complete inspiration, interesting and informative.
I found the videos very exciting, hopeful and inspiring. The video is proof that with the right support and person centred care, someone with severe learning difficulties and challenging behaviour can be helped to achieve a real quality of life.*

The videos me gave me an insight into how as workers we could support people with challenging behaviour and learning disabilities to live independently as well as through services, to help enable them to get the best out of life. One of the videos also gave a good insight into how life is like for families and carers of those with challenging behaviour and learning disabilities...I feel that if I was to go out on placement in a learning disabilities team, I would probably watch these videos again to enrich my learning and the support I provide.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the caveats raised above in the ethical and procedural section, these results do indicate that of all the first year modules the Working with Experts by Experience module has been the one which the respondents have indicated as most enabling their self-discovery in terms of being more aware of their values, attitudes and belief systems. Even those students who felt that were quite reflective before the course indicated that they were still more reflective and aware of potential conflicts which might need resolved in order to be most effective as a future social worker. An integral part of this module has been the use of different technological aspects which has aided the participation of a wide range of service users and carers and been very well evaluated by the students in terms of their affects upon their experiential learning journey.

Further Research

The study has been repeated this year with the 2014-15 intake of students which are the second cohort to undertake this new module. The questions have been asked prior to the students' commencement upon the module and have been answered by all 45 students. The module is currently nearing completion so will generate much more comprehensive data this time around being answered by the whole cohort and not just a minority group. However early responses to the first 4 questions are remarkably similar to the statistics generation in the smaller piece of research represented in Figure 1 above.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Currently we are engaged with widening the use of different forms of technology to assist in our teaching and the Working with Experts by Experience module is shortly going to be available for teaching online via the use of 'Blackboard' the University of Cumbria's Virtual Learning Environment.

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