

Using arts-based methods to develop service user led learning materials for social work education.

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Abstract:

Theories transmitted to students about professional practice in health and social care come traditionally from the perspective of practitioners, often as a heroic narrative, inevitably casting the service-user in a passive role (Wiltshir, 2006). Post-modern theorists like Foucault (1973) call this the authoritative 'gaze' that objectifies the user of public services, generating a power relationship between the professional and the service user. New perspectives are needed to redress this imbalance, drawing on the narratives of the service-users themselves (Greenhalgh, 2006).

Since 2007, a project led by service-users at London South Bank University has been experimenting with new approaches to developing learning and teaching materials for social work education using opportunities afforded by the recent accreditation of awards within the General Social Care Council's new Post Qualifying Framework. This paper outlines some of our experiences to date of experimenting with creative arts-based approaches to facilitate the development of learning materials as 'inherently creative acts' (Sagan, 2007). This paper documents the experiences of a small group of service users and academics as we have all worked in different ways to co-produce it using different mediums and media in order to contribute our views.

Keywords: *arts, service users, experiential learning, social work education.*

Introduction

A body of evidence has been developing that shows that crossing the boundaries between the social sciences with the arts and humanities can help to communicate experiences of trauma and suffering more powerfully (Schweitzer, 2006). This also provides a mechanism to free those involved with care from traditional categories and lenses through which we traditionally view the world. This paper arises from the documented experiences of a small group of service users and academics. We have been experimenting with new approaches to developing learning and teaching methods

and materials within social work education using the arts. All members of our group have contributed to the development of this paper and in fact used the arts in order to contribute to writing it: for example through video, poetry and keeping a diary. In this paper, we will firstly outline some of the current thinking around how engaging with the arts has offered the caring professions and those they work with, new pedagogic insights about learning and practice. We will then reflect on significant aspects of the process that our particular project group has engaged in over the last twelve months, in order to develop our own unique approach. We will conclude with a summary of some of the areas to which our project has taken us. This has included experiences of using poetry with service users, managers and practice educators on an academic module about assessment and learning in the Post Qualifying Award.

Background

There has been a plethora of legislative and policy development placing user participation centre-stage in social care (DoH, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2005). This has been driven by interest in human rights, citizenship, choice, empowerment, independent living, advocacy, consumerism and democratic or participatory approaches. Not least, they have followed civil rights campaigns and burgeoning 'self-help' movement of service users themselves (Begum, 2007, p. 85). This has extended to all areas concerned with social care including workforce development. User participation with varying degrees of success has become a common feature of formal learning, training and qualifying processes (Beresford *et al.*, 2006). Since the inception of the Degree in Social Work and Post Qualifying awards in 2003, most professionals will have had users involved to some capacity in shaping their professional development. However to date, there has been little evaluation of service user involvement in social work education (Carr, 2004; Doel *et al.*, 2007). Service user involvement in the development, delivery and evaluation of the social work curriculum has been deemed essential to make sure their needs and opinions are reflected in the design and development of qualifications (GSCC, 2002).

Arnstein (1969) describes the concept of partnership as sharing power through a process of negotiation. Involving service users in the educational process should make us wary of not being over-dependent on certain types of participation at the expense of others. For example, many people find that when users tell their individual personal stories it is very powerful and much more likely to leave a lasting impression than if users facilitate a teaching session on how to define and achieve strategic user-focused social care outcomes (Begum, 2007). A more critical role however, may shift us to a model where users have a more active role to play. This can be done in a variety of ways as colleagues, leaders, managers and partners at a strategic level within both curriculum design and in the delivery of learning. This should allow service users to assert their own interests and an *outsider interpretation of the world of others, entailing a humbling of the professional or academic position* (Foster, 2007, p. 366). Therefore it is necessary to challenge some of the inherent and covert messages that utilise heroic

narratives, inevitably casting the service-user in a passive role (Wiltshire, 2006) and in recognising the collective potential of involving users in a more organic way. At London South Bank University, we had established a small steering group of service users during 2006 – 07 for the purpose of consultation and development of new Post Qualifying (PQ) social work awards in Leadership and Management and Practice Education (GSCC, 2006a, 2007b). We had various debates with each other as a result of key messages from user consultation events on what people thought about the development needs of professionals preparing for these roles. Developing our PQ awards, gave rise to a variety of learning insights and different aspects of both management and practice educator development. This led us to focus on the importance of encouraging interaction, reflection, engagement and commitment to learning with this potential group. For example, consultations with Older People, Looked After Children and people with Learning Disabilities gave rise to a number of comments about the perceived remoteness of these professionals from day to day service users experiences and their lives in general. Some of the comments from the service use consultation included the following:

“They shouldn’t be in it just for the money”

“they should find out what’s going on and give good supervision and support to their workers”

“Be straight and honest and make good eye contact”

“Why don’t they ask the service users what progress their workers making with them and what help is being given”

“Managers should check the suitability of the worker and their work – go out with the worker and do spot checks”

“Get involved and listen to what we’re saying”

“Please turn off your mobile phone and show respect”

The relationship between users, carers and leaders and managers is an intricate one. This has to be built on mutual respect, shared power and a partnership that accords proper weight to each other’s roles (Begum, 2007). It has been observed that “most of the discourse that takes place in service-led user involvement initiatives from management perspectives is *action oriented and instrumentalized, in the process objectifying the lived experience of service users. This means that expressions of personal experience are relevant only in so far as they can be incorporated instrumentally into discourse*” (Hodge, 2005. p. 177, cited in Carr, 2007, p. 272). Likewise, the literature on educational development in general, and on management education in particular, contains increasing calls for the introduction of new innovations and active learning experiences and reminds us that emotions can also play a crucial role in learning (Moore & Ryan, 2006). This ultimately led to our steering group re-establishing itself after the validation of the new PQ awards was approved. In early 2007, we successfully bid for a small innovation grant from the University’s Learning and Teaching Committee. Several members of the group already had an active interest in the arts for example; one was a video artist, another a musician and two were poets. However, the readiness to create

new ground and to engage or energize each other was just as significant in the projects endeavor. We believe that whilst artistic expression is sometimes conceived as the prerogative of a few gifted individuals, the power of the arts provides an opportunity to develop creative imagination on the basis that every person has within them, the potential for creativity. For example familiarity with storytelling, photography, pictures and music are part of everyday social life (Simmons & Hicks, 2006). Having developed a level of working rapport and trust within our small group of nine people, we therefore tentatively threw ourselves into the project with little overall plan about what we were actually going to do. We had to allow ideas to surface and find ways of expressing them. *“At the beginning, the meeting was inhibiting and people felt tense, but now it feels nourishing”* (Service user member in a recent videoed ‘evaluation’ discussion). However through creating art work, poems and short videos of ourselves at work, we were able to start constructing our own journey in considering opportunities for experiential learning. We adopted a mantra of ‘if we are not prepared to have a go ourselves, how can we ask other learners to do it?’ For the three academic staff involved, this was a very different experience from ‘telling’ what should happen in the curriculum from our own professional perspective. All in all, an equally important outcome has been the group journey and effort comprised of the many individuals within it. Some of the members expressed that participation in the project increased their self-esteem and self-image as we began to find out new things about ourselves and our creative abilities.

“The experience has been like a tree with branches bearing fruit, and different people in the tree such as service users and students”

“I got a job as a result of this experience and others like it. I was able to add it to my CV”

“What’s good is now I take the bus to get here instead of taxis and I feel proud of getting out more”

(individual group members contribution)

Use of the arts in the caring professions – an overview

Utilising the arts in learning and research in the caring professions has been cited as leading to a greater closeness to the pathos of social life, *a glimpsing of the truth* (Foster, 2007, p. 370). It helps to stay true to a more participatory approach than conventional methods of developing and conveying learning (Reason, 1998, p. 262). Criticism has been made of the current social work educational climate for its emphasis on instrumentality, technicism and rational styles of learning more dependent on ontological and interpersonal approaches (Foster, 2007). Much has been written about the changing nature of teaching and learning in social work education, and it has been argued that without the effective counter balance of an empowering professional ethos (Watson & West, 2003) and more philosophically robust notions of learning and theory (Prior, 2005), there will be a bureaucratic and growing commodification of the profession in relation to its managerialist agenda (Jordan & Jordan, 2002). Gould (1996) asserts that to use the arts in professional education requires an acknowledgement that

formal knowledge is not ontologically privileged over the personal knowledge gained by an individual's personal reflection and introspection. Formal theory, he suggests, is directed towards representation and explanation, whereas practitioner knowledge is essentially hermeneutic as it is about understanding, interpretation and appropriation (Gould, 1996; Usher & Bryant, 1989). Within social work education, knowledge, training and skill are essential but how we find a balance is challenging (Goldstein, 2001). *"Its good to question and the so called 'system' has always laid down the parameters for being 'in' or 'out' of society"* (one of our service user members). Artistic pursuits can unlock the way in which we see or read knowledge and in releasing some of the emotions involved in learning (Chamberlayne *et al.*, 2007). Social work works at the borders of knowing and uncertainty and not knowing the unknowable (Taylor & White, 2006). Activists in this area such as Goldstein (Gray, 2002) have experimented with the arts and humanities in social work education and practice as a means to energize imaginative, creative, reflective and intuitive aptitudes. For a number of educationalists (Goldstein, 2001; Gould, 1996; Eraut, 1994) the educational model most consistent with a humanist approach is experiential learning since it prepares learners to respect, respond to, and find meaning in the life experiences of their clients, "The situational, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, linguistic and moral as well as the social and psychological" (Goldstein, 2001, cited in Gray, 2002). Sound social work practice rests not so much in an increase in empathy but rather a more nuanced and memorable way of understanding relations of power (Phillipson, 2007). Arts based methods are seen as allowing other ways into everyday work, conversations of power and the dialogic relations of social work practice thus allowing social workers to imagine how to place themselves (Phillipson, 2007, p. 200). *"My suggestion is that as well as providing empathy, alternative ways to engage us are important. Social workers should be helped to develop. They need abilities in negotiating skills and confidence in achieving truthful approaches to their work as well as resistance and reflection. This approach is not merely another way to 'fix things' but is potentially a very subversive challenge to the way social work is carried out"* (diary entry from a service user member).

Poetry writing session – using narrative to articulate practice

Greenhalgh (2006) describes narratives or stories as *natural and universal forms of communication* (Greenhalgh, 2006) that are an informal subtext in all relationships between professionals and service users. If acknowledged, they can allow the service user to become the 'hero' of the story and shift the balance of power from what the post-structuralist theorist Foucault (1993) calls the authoritative 'gaze' that objectifies the user of public services.

Our group has used poetry to perform and reveal something of ourselves and our identity. 'Performative writing' is a tool developed from the work of Julia Kristeva (1984), a semiotics theorist within post-structuralism, which helps to achieve this balance between the objective and the subjective. Kristeva juxtaposed a poetic narrative of her experience as a mother with an academic discussion of motherhood,

demonstrating that the contrasting styles communicate more effectively together (1987). The post-structuralist philosopher Deleuze explained this effect as the power of discourse at the emotional level combined with scientific discourse to challenge our experience and orderly views of the world and open up new paradigms (Colebrook, 2002).

By immersing ourselves in the humanities and especially literature, we have the potential to develop a much greater appreciation for the inside lives and experiences of other people and to imagine the value of these by seeing the 'other' as we would see ourselves (Irving, 1999). Acknowledgement of the value of fictional form such as drama, novels, poetry and narrative encouraging compassionate engagement with practice (Taylor & White, 2006) and narrative ethics. This is in contrast to principle-based ethics allowing the characters, actions and events in a story to become part of the process of reaching a decision (Greenlaugh, 2006). Our poetry writing sessions are led by a service user of mental health services and have been used with both student managers and practice educators to explore alternatives to formal knowledge on the subject of being in a particular role. Simple triggers are used such as letters of the alphabet, colour or 'props' to encourage students to articulate their responses to certain scenarios or problems. These poems are then shared and discussed and students have particularly appreciated the opportunity to 'take risks'. *"It enables intuition to surface, using emotional responses to elicit our experiences"* (project member feedback). Heaney, for example talks specifically about how poetry can take us from the *domain of the matter of fact into the domain of the imagined* (1999, p. xiii) in which we confront the different types of knowledge needing to be reconciled. Managers in particular may face complex ethical dilemmas when managing competing demands in the services they manage. Expressing themselves through writing poetry as both an individual and collaborative activity would seem to offer the opportunity for interpretative ability, insight and critical reflection into complex areas.

Conclusion

Within the scope of this paper, it has not been possible to go into any depth about the particular activities we have engaged with over the last twelve months. Suffice to say we have been productive and creative far beyond our original expectations. Our projects have included:

- the use of folding artists books to express our 'competing' and 'common' identities within the learning and teaching environment;
- participation in a taught Balinese Gamelan percussion session at the London Symphony Orchestra Discovery Centre as an experiential and alternative method of learning about teamwork and equality in learning a new skill;
- poetry writing sessions with students led by a service user of mental health services, and;

- the use of drama to explore the realities of service users intimate relationships with other service users.

Our work is ongoing and the outcomes are yet to be systematically evaluated. The next stage is to secure further funding to facilitate evaluation of projects so these learning objects can be shared and disseminated. However, we offer this paper as a source of inspiration to others and food for thought in considering alternative and more inclusive methods of preparing for practice.

In conclusion, one of us would particularly like to say *“how much I am enjoying getting to know all the people in the group: they are nice people. I am also very interested in the opportunity to be involved in the acting and filming activities. I am enthusiastic about the fact that the materials I will be helping to develop will be used by the university to train social workers”*. (Service User group member in conversation with his support worker). Finally one of our members has written a poem which she read at the Practical Learning conference in Edinburgh which expresses some of the enjoyment and opportunities for collaboration and enjoyment in learning:

I'm flying to a conference!

Well, Blow me down,
I shall be in the sky,
They said that we'd get there the best possible way,
And this best way was truly to FLY.

What a treat, what fun,
I can hardly wait,
It's the end of next week,
Can't remember the date.

My name is Bee,
And my dog's name is Bertie,
We always come as a pair,
Here, there and Everywhere.

I'd like to take this time to share
With you, information about which I care,
That is helping out at training days,
In, oh so many different ways.

It helps to use visual performing arts,
To read a poem or make up a rhyme.
This is often how the training starts,
It may be today that we use a mime????

We are getting things ready, sorting ourselves out,
We'll soon be presenting, being out and about.

Attending this course,
Speaking at that,
Sharing with the students,
What we'd like them to know.

A light-hearted look,
Is better than reading a stuffy old book.
As the clocks keep turning,
We are always learning.
The tutors are often seen as knowing all,
Standing like they do in front of the hall.
Students are keen to learn more and more,
This is when I come in, through the open door.

Service Users, students and Tutors,
People coming from different places.
All three groups are learning new things,
We spent some time banging the drums!!!

Those in charge, those who assist and those who are learning new skills,
Can join together as we did,
We went as a group to learn to play drums,
No one had done it before.

We loved every minute and no way could you tell,
Who was a learner, a trainer or teacher.
A jolly good time was had by all.

It was so good to know that we don't have a label
We were all "who we are" - enjoying ourselves.
Performing together and making a tune,
Drumming on our own, and we learnt very soon.....

It did not matter where you had come from,
Or what your role was outside when you were at home.
Equal is what we all felt that we were,
All new, all excited and all willing to come,

Again and again to be together, enjoy.
Helping each other sort out for ourselves,

Different ways to deliver and learn

We've written some verse,
And played the gamelan drums.
We are going to make a film.

And as we progress and go a bit further,
We will find other ways to try.
To share with students and tutors too,
HOW IT FEELS TO BE "JUST LIKE ME AND YOU.

We don't have a label - Diagnosed insane,
We are able to be helpful and contribute to the course,
This is something new, we are learning to do, and I am sure it's the way to go.

We are going to keep on,
Giving in this dramatic way.
Let the service users speak to you,
Allow them to have their say.

Bee

The authors of this paper wish to express their thanks to London South Bank's Learning and Teaching Committee for their financial support for this project as well as its ongoing interest and encouragement in our work.

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