

## Social Work at The University of Birmingham

### Developing Social Work Skills for Employment: an enquiry-based learning approach

**Denise:** Effective communication skills are vitally important. Employers expect Universities to teach these to social work students in preparation for their future professional roles.

Before going out on their first practice placements, we have to ensure that students have access to teaching that helps them develop a whole range of key skills. These include employing and responding to appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues in interview situations. They also need to recognise and respond to emotions, identify and manage risk, and learn how to work and communicate in teams.

**Tarsem:** Using an enquiry-based learning design, Denise and I not only aimed to ensure that students gained knowledge about effective communication skills, but we also wanted them to have the opportunities to apply that knowledge in the role of a social worker.

So as part of the learning design we made sure that students were provided with opportunities to engage with life like case scenarios and opportunities to work in teams to conduct research, problem-solve and then role-play solutions, so they could demonstrate their learning not only to us but also to their peers.

**Denise:** Injecting a sense of reality into the teaching situation is an important part of preparing students for practice. So we carefully chose some video-based case studies about real life situations to trigger student learning.

**Gary:** In engaging with the case study, I think it related to real social work practice, from the perspective that we saw what appeared to be a real life situation.

**Denise:** Whilst working with their peers, students were encouraged to develop their team communication skills. Students conducted research and then used role-play, to show how they as social workers would respond to the problems presented in the case studies.

**Sarah:** The role-play exercises allowed me to obtain confidence, and also allowed me to apply my theory and put it into practice prior to going out into the field and meeting service users.

**Tarsem:** For an enquiry-based approach to work we have to make sure that we create a safe environment in which students can learn by sharing views and feedback. We've found that this type of environment can result in really effective student learning experiences.

**Denise:** As tutors we provided continual feedback with the aim of developing learning through a process of discussion and debate.

**Gary:** I felt that the group work, and the discussion of the reading that we did around the role-play, was very helpful, in that in some cases, it, it clarified some of the information that perhaps I wouldn't have understood had I been left to my own devices.

**Chantel:** This learning approach challenged me by, making me go out of my comfort zone, and by learning in a different way through role-plays, so, a lot of the other students were giving feedback on how I interacted, it was quite telling but it was also quite challenging because it made you look at yourself in a different way. It enabled me to grow by understanding my strengths and weaknesses.

**Tarsem:** Students also get the chance to practise their skills with service user colleagues when they undertake their assessments. For the students this brings in a really fresh new learning dimension.

**Riya:** The steps involved in the readiness for practice assessment I thought were really good actually upon reflection. We were given a scenario before we went in so we were given 10 minutes to just sit down and think about the scenario at hand and then it was a live 10 minute interview with the service user. Before that took place we got to that we got to watch ourselves back so that was quite good, because we got to see our body language and read that and just and basically be critical about how you would in a real life situation behave and act with a service user.

I think that the feedback that the service users gave definitely helped students to learn and understand how we could improve make changes I think the best thing is learning about where you're going right where you're going wrong and just making those changes, modifying how you're behaving really.

**Cillian:** Every student learns in a different way and so we need to provide a broad range of learning and teaching approaches to develop their knowledge around their discipline as well as learning team working, problem solving and critical thinking skills in a safe environment.

What this distinctive approach demonstrates is a good example of the commitment that Birmingham has to ensure that students who graduate from this University are as well prepared as possible for the reality of a 21st Century work environment.

**Tarsem:** By continually reviewing our learning and teaching approaches here at the University of Birmingham, our aim is provide students with the best possible platform on which to develop their future professional roles.