Promises and Pitfalls: Involving Service Users and Carers in Social Work Manager Education

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Partnership working occupies an increasing amount of social work managers’ time and budget, requiring skills and abilities not always developed previously within social work programmes. Much discussion around partnership working centres on building collaborative inter-agency and inter-professional relationships with less emphasis on the need to ensure good working relationships with service users and carers, despite their being the ultimate recipients of the process. This article explores efforts to develop a focus on service users and carers within a module for social work managers as part of post-qualifying (PQ) social work education. It documents a process where, initially, service users and carers provided personal testimonies of being recipients of services and then subsequently occupied more authoritative roles within teaching, to the current position when they are again less actively involved.

In describing these developments it explores possible reasons why involving service users and carers within this module has proved challenging. The article acknowledges that there is relatively limited literature about the involvement of service users and carers in PQ education. It suggests that lessons learned from involving service users and carers in qualifying social work training cannot directly be transposed to the post-qualifying context.

Keywords: Post-Qualifying Education; Social Work; Service Users and Carers; Partnership Working; Collaboration

Introduction

This article explores our experience, over the past five years, in developing a module for social work managers on ‘Creating and Maintaining Partnerships’ as part of a
Post-Qualifying (PQ) programme in Leadership and Management in Social Work. It particularly addresses efforts to ensure a focus on service users and carers within the module teaching through a range of different approaches. It begins with an outline of the post-qualifying social work education framework in England and the expectations that have driven these developments, before going on to show how the ‘Creating and Maintaining Partnerships’ module fits within the Diploma and linked PQ (Higher Specialism) in Leadership and Management for Social Work programme being delivered within this Institute at the University of Birmingham. The article explores the motivation for involving service users and carers within the module and charts a number of phases when service users and carers have occupied more authoritative roles within the teaching, and the current position when they are less actively involved. It describes the responses of participants to the teaching during each of the phases and explores why a focus on the needs of service users and carers should prove so challenging. The article concludes by reflecting on the process and the implications for future teaching.

The Development and Purpose of Post-Qualifying Social Work Education

Since the early 1990s, government employers and employees have recognised the need for continuous professional development (CPD) of qualified social workers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Regulatory bodies in each country were charged with creating a framework for PQ social work education (Tovey, 2007). In 2007, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) introduced a new framework in England (the context for this article) which provides three levels of PQ award (Specialist, Higher Specialist and Advanced) in five specialisms (Leadership and Management, Adults, Mental Health, Children, Young People, Families and Carers, and Practice Education). The higher specialism PQ is usually undertaken by front line, junior or middle manager grades (Tovey, 2007) and the framework has been designed to accommodate modular university-based learning with emphasis on ‘joint ownership of the total learning experience by both employers and academic bodies’ (Taylor et al., 2010, p. 482).

There have been great expectations of the PQ framework, particularly around its impact on the quality of services and standards offered by the workforce through the creation of a ‘motivated and stable workforce’ (Galpin, 2009, p. 69) and ‘a deeper sense of overall professional identity’ (Adams, 2007, p. 37). Adams suggests it has the potential to be transformational ‘by drawing on values, knowledge and experience in a systematic way; looking back at what we have done and looking forward to what to do next’. Galpin (2009) is more cautious, expressing concern that it is in danger of being driven by regulatory requirements and workforce planning concerns rather than a commitment to social work practice and values.

The ‘Creating and Maintaining Partnerships’ module is one of four core modules offered within the Diploma and linked PQ (Higher Specialism) in Leadership and Management for Social Work at the University of Birmingham. Candidates undertake three other compulsory modules (Managing Diversity, Leading for Quality
Assurance—Supervision Skills for Performance Management, and Developing Organisations and Organisational Change) and then choose two modules from a number in line with their role, tasks and responsibilities. These modules include: Reflective Practice for Managers, Coaching and Mentoring, Leading for Learning and Researching Professional Practice. Each focuses on different aspects of management practice; however, all the modules reflect the key management functions and occupational requirements for excellence in management (Topss, 2004; GSCC, 2005). When the PQ for Leadership and Management for Social Work programme was introduced in 2006 at the University of Birmingham, steps to include service users and carers were relatively tentative; the ‘Creating and Maintaining Partnerships’ module seemed a logical place to involve them more directly because of its emphasis on skills for partnership and collaboration.

The ‘Creating and Maintaining Partnerships’ module focuses on the establishment, implementation and management of partnership arrangements and strategies to enhance the impact of service delivery within social care and health settings. It seeks to enable participant managers to understand and explore evaluatively the benefits and barriers to collaboration and partnership working in their own setting on the basis of theory and research (Glasby and Dickinson, 2008). It equips them to evaluate their own skills and practice (and that of their staff) in the creation and maintenance of partnerships.

The module encourages participants to reflect on the processes of working collaboratively and in partnership with others, including professionals, service users and carers, and the resultant management implications. ‘Partnership’ and ‘Collaboration’ are key concepts used within the teaching. Managers often seem to use the terms interchangeably but it is our contention that these concepts are contested and different. One of the definitions for ‘partnership’ used within the teaching is from Sullivan and Skelcher (2002, p. 1) and describes it as the ‘sharing of responsibility and overcoming the inflexibilities created by organisational, sectoral and even natural boundaries’. ‘Collaboration’ is identified as ‘a respect for other professionals and service users and their skills and from this starting point, an agreed sharing of authority, responsibility and resources aimed at specific outcomes or actions, and gained through cooperation and consensus’ (Quinney, 2006, p. 11).

The module has been delivered on 10 occasions since its introduction in 2006. The 20-credit module has five taught days. Reference is made to service users and carers throughout the teaching but the fourth day specifically focuses on the issue of ‘partnership working with service users and carers’. There are usually about 20 front line social work managers in each cohort; some are newly promoted whilst others have more than 10 years’ experience as a manager. Some work in Children’s Services whilst others have management roles in Adult or Mental Health Services.

**Why Have a Focus on Service Users and Carers?**

The Institute of Applied Social Studies (IASS) has a long history of successfully involving service users and carers in qualifying social work education. It seemed a
natural progression to extend this approach into the PQ Leadership and Management for Social Work programme, endorsing the GSCC statement that ‘service user and carer involvement is at the heart of all PQ education’ (Lawson-Brown, 2007, p. 205). The motivation to ensure a focus within the module on service users and carers as ‘key partners’ is based on a number of principles. Firstly, to have a module about effective partnership working which only focused on partnering with other professionals seems to confirm social work in its outdated mode as a process which does things to rather than with service users (Warren, 2007). As Leiba and Weinstein (2003, p. 63) indicate ‘service users are the most important participants in the collaborative process’ when looking at the potential for success or failure. It also demonstrates our commitment to raising the quality of social work services through approaches which value service user and carer perspectives (Barnes et al., 2010). Our understanding of ‘service users’ and ‘carers’ reflects that of Doel and Best (2008, p. ix) which refers to service users as ‘people who experience social work directly as users or carers of those people’. Barnes et al. (2010) argue that the social policy and social care landscape has been transformed over the last 20 years and now the state has a very different relationship with its citizens. They suggest that through participation of service users and carers there is the potential to improve services, increase accountability by challenging the power of professionals and encourage shared decision-making about the design, management and delivery of services. This ideology of empowerment is challenged by Beresford (2010) suggesting that whilst the ‘Whitehall rhetoric’ emphasises citizen control and consumer choice, all too frequently service users are treated ‘as little more than a data source’ (2010, pp. 235–237) and may ‘run the risk of being incorporated unwittingly into dominant consumerist agendas by feeding into them’. Some of this concern about the ideology of empowerment is shared by Leech (2007, p. 61) who suggests that much of recently redesigned social work provision involves much greater distance between worker and service user and is driven primarily by economics with industrial style approaches to ‘care packages’ such that ‘social workers find themselves on the boundaries spending large amounts of time denying care’.

The requirement to involve service users and carers in the design and delivery of education and training of social workers in the UK was introduced by the Department of Health in 2002 (DH, 2002). The two-year diploma was replaced by the three-year BA in Social Work programme and the provision of ring-fenced money for service user and carer involvement has encouraged a wide variety of approaches across programmes. Social work programme staff have been keen to share their experiences about process and impact (Molyneux and Irvine, 2004; Tyler, 2006; Warren, 2007; Green and Wilkes, 2009) within social work education literature and SCIE has done much to promote good practice (Lewin, 2004). However, many (Moss et al., 2010; Beresford, 2010) are critical that service user involvement in education remains tokenistic, with service user and carer knowledge and experience all too frequently being treated as less valuable than academic knowledge. The role of service users and carers in PQ education is less established, although in 2005 the GSCC indicated that ‘those regional planning networks developing PQ programmes must develop them with the involvement of service users and carers alongside employers at regional,
sub-regional and local level’ (GSCC, 2005, p. 9). Furthermore, there is very much less written about the practice and impact of their involvement in PQ programmes within the social work education literature.

Involving Servicer Users and Carers Within Module Teaching

IASS has been involved in qualifying training for social workers for over 100 years (Davis, 2008) and successfully involved service users and carers within its teaching provision before it was made a compulsory component of programmes. In 2007 IASS appointed its own Service User and Carer Coordinator (Joy, one of the authors of this paper and herself a previous service user) and she has more recently become involved in the planning and delivery of this module. In 2006, when this module was developed, an assumption was made that if social work provision is for the benefit of recipients then service managers—the participants within our PQ programme—would value exploring service user and carer perspectives, especially if this was away from the pressure of their work settings. It was appreciated that managers are frequently under pressure to deliver services to meet organisational requirements which can force them to focus on processes at the possible expense of outcomes, so the teaching needed to avoid any atmosphere of blame or criticism (Jones, 2001; Watson, 2008). Budget limitations precluded having service users and carers as part of the teaching team for the five days, so it was with a mixture of expedience and pragmatism that the decision was made to focus specifically on service user and carer issues on one day, though inevitably they are acknowledged throughout the module. The aims for this particular day have changed over time in terms of emphasis, but centre on exploring the issues of working collaboratively with service users and carers and identifying the resultant management implications.

Over the last five years the content and approach to teaching on this day has been revised in the light of participant written feedback gained from module evaluation forms and reflections on the teaching process (both ours and the service users and carers who have been involved). Table 1 captures the different revisions over time and it has been broken down into four distinct phases. It can be seen from the table that the academic inputs (at the beginning of the morning and immediately after lunch) have remained relatively consistent over time; what has changed has been the mechanisms through which service user and carer perspectives are explored. Phases 1 and 2 show service users and carers actively involved in the process whereas in Phases 3 and 4 they are not. A brief commentary about each of the different phases, particularly the impact, strengths and limitations of that approach, is included.

Phase 1

When the module was first delivered, a service user, Tania (pseudonym), was recruited on the basis that she was experienced at working within social work education, had the appropriate skills and was keen to be involved. She planned and managed the day working with one of the IASS lecturers. It was clear at this stage that Tania felt an integral part of the module. Following the introductory lecture, which explored the
Table 1  The Changing Structure and Content of the Service User and Carer Focused Teaching Day for the ‘Creating and Maintaining Partnerships’ Module

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus/Phase</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory session</td>
<td>Lecture input on SU movement SUs/carers ‘told their stories’ followed by small group discussion</td>
<td>Lecture input on SU movement Case study managed by SUs and carers, working in small groups</td>
<td>Lecture input on SU movement Use of DVD to explore young people’s experiences of being in care followed by small group discussion (no SU/carers presence)</td>
<td>Lecture input on SU movement Use of photo story, written narratives and SCIE video extract to explore the challenge and value of SU perspectives (no SU/carers presence)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Main body of morning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Later afternoon</td>
<td>Application of Wright et al. (2006) model within own setting (exercise)</td>
<td>Application of Wright et al. (2006) model within own setting (exercise)</td>
<td>Q&amp;A session exploring the involvement of SUs and carers in SW education</td>
<td>Use of journal and book extracts to explore the issue of ‘working in partnership’ with ‘involuntary clients’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Please note that the initials ‘SU’ are used here to denote service users, but this abbreviation is applied solely in light of the space available within the table.
development and impact of the service user movement resulting in the shift from ‘client to service user’ (Scourfield, 2007, p. 108), Tania outlined her own experiences of being on the receiving end of services, particularly identifying what helped or hindered that process. On occasions Tania was joined by her care coordinator or by Peter, a long-term carer with a disabled young son. Participants were asked to reflect on their contributions particularly with a view to identifying the management implications. Later in the day, Wright et al.’s (2006) ‘Whole System’s Approach’ was introduced as an analytical tool through which an agency’s structure, practice, culture and review mechanisms can be explored.

This personal testimonial model of service user input is well established (Green and Wilkes, 2009) with clear strengths and disadvantages. The service user is in a powerful position and their input can be emotionally challenging. However, all too frequently participants in the session were able to distance themselves from the experience suggesting that this would never happen in their agency. Furthermore, some suggested that Tania had unrealistic expectations and she did not appreciate the organisational pressures they were under. A number of participants indicated that they felt that the input was more suited to qualifying training as they were already familiar with such concerns. Tania herself was disappointed with what she felt to be their disengagement with the realities of being a receiver of services and after the third time of delivering the teaching day (with support and discussion with teaching staff) she withdrew from the module.

Phase 2

It seemed that service users and carers ‘telling their stories’ did not seem to be creating a sufficiently challenging environment to promote learning within the group. There was also a concern that repeated exposure to what was perceived to be manager disinterest in their experiences might be personally damaging to service users and carers as educators. The decision was made to redesign the service user and carer input by involving service users as consultants giving them power and a position of authority. The aspiration was similar to that of Green and Wilkes (2009, p. 198) ‘to create a learning environment which did not replicate elements of the social worker/client relationship’ by moving away from personal experience. A case study was created which reflected the hopes, expectations, conflict and challenge of front line practice. Four service users and carers were recruited (again on the basis of their skills, experience and enthusiasm for working in social work education). They collaborated with us to develop the case study and then, subsequently, worked with small groups of participants in order to explore the perspective of one of the characters within the case study and the barriers to building collaborative relationships. Each group was then asked to identify the management implications that the case provoked. The hope was that by managers and service user/carers consultants working side-by-side they would relate to each other as colleagues rather than as ‘cases’. The academic inputs appeared to have been generally well received and so remained unchanged from the previous phase.

Response to the day proved very mixed and emotions ran high. Two participants became angry and withdrew for about half an hour from the teaching room on the
grounds that they felt this was not a good use of their time as managers who needed to take a more strategic view, whilst others voiced their embarrassment at what they deemed to be the ‘rude’ behaviour of their colleagues. Again there was the suggestion that the case study was more suited to a ‘preparation for placement’ day and two participants asked about the background of the service user/carer consultants, suggesting a preference to keep them in the ‘testimony’ type role described in Phase 1. In the de-briefing session, the service user/carer consultants expressed anger that some participants had not taken the day sufficiently seriously, finding reasons to keep a distance from some of the challenges of building collaborative relationships within front line practice.

Phases 3 and 4

The decision was made to re-design the teaching day on the grounds that it had been very difficult to manage, expensive to deliver with a very mixed response in terms of learning such that the expense could not be justified. There was also concern not to expose any more service user and carer contributors to the mixed and occasionally hostile attitudes of participants. The challenge was therefore to find ways of exploring what it was like to be on the receiving end of services which encouraged curiosity rather than defensiveness. The case study was replaced, initially in Phase 3 by a DVD developed with a partner agency which documented the views of young people who had received social work services during their childhood, and in Phase 4 by a short photo story and a SCIE film extract (SCIE, 2010) exploring one local authority’s efforts to engage with a wide range of service users through a consultation in order to gain a better understanding of the impact of services. The decision to move from the DVD to the mixture of inputs was prompted by a wish to explore a variety of perspectives. The academic inputs on this teaching day have been added to in terms of more models and greater complexity of theory in response to written feedback from participants.

The reaction of participants has been less volatile and generally more positive. The exploration of service user and carer perspectives in the teaching room without service users and carers present has allowed some participants to voice both positive and negative implications and the issues that are particularly difficult in their setting of getting beyond tokenism. Arguably, the absence of service users and carers allows some participants to keep a distance from ‘real people’ and the challenges they pose. The irony of having a day focused on the issues of working collaboratively with service users and carers without their physical presence has been a cause of much concern for the authors and prompts consideration that the current teaching approach is itself in danger of being tokenistic, valuing academic inputs more highly than service user contributions (Branfield, 2009; Green and Wilkes, 2009).

Reflections on the Process and Implications for Teaching

Writing a review of this teaching over the last five years has been instructive and has highlighted that this part of the module has been revised more than the rest of the
teaching, and yet it remains the most difficult to manage and its impact is often unpredictable. Furthermore, what worked well with one cohort is not always equally well received by apparently similar participants. Even within the same cohort, some will voice their appreciation of exploring service user and carer views whilst others actively distance themselves from the experience. Those who express dissatisfaction rarely number more than four out of a cohort of 20 but we feel it is sufficient to be of concern. Between those who describe the experience as ‘beneficial’, ‘helpful’ and ‘an opportunity to reflect’, and those voicing discontent, are those who acknowledge the importance of the ‘uncomfortable feelings’ engendered by this teaching. Adams (2007, p. 42) suggests that PQ education should prompt debate about practice and as such this can prove ‘an uncomfortable process that necessitates us continually to gaze critically at ourselves’. The task for educators is to distinguish between voiced concerns that are expressions of the discomfort of challenge and those which are indications that the teaching material is not appropriate to the task.

Sullivan and Johns (2002) suggest, when undertaking teaching which can be seen as challenging, that there are two related risks. If the emphasis is laid upon the structural reasons behind the challenges, the recipient may feel that the situation is hopeless and that they, as individuals, cannot change anything. Conversely if the emphasis is placed upon the individual, this may imply some degree of blame on the individual (Sullivan and Johns, 2002, p. 218). The challenge in the classroom for social work managers is to explore those competing demands and for us as lecturers to acknowledge and integrate social work values, service user and carer needs and perceptions, and the pressures facing all social workers, particularly those in management positions.

With hindsight, it is apparent that the assumption, made when the module was first designed, that the experience of involving service users and carers in qualifying social work training might simply be transferred to PQ education was not appropriate. The differing pressures facing social workers and those in management positions need to be acknowledged. The divergent demands of the target-based focus of successive governments and subsequent rise in managerialism (Watson, 2008), often conflicts with service users and carers seeking quality services which recognise and respond to them as individuals. This leaves social work managers in an unenviable position. Meagher and Parton (2004, p. 20) suggest that managerialism ‘reduces both the visibility of and capacity to care, it also makes care more difficult to teach, learn, justify and develop’. The degree to which this statement is true may be debated but the challenge faced by both social work managers and educators in this area is likely to remain a contested and contentious area. It does resonate with the comment of one service user included in Branfield’s review of user involvement in social work education:

The later service user involvement comes in training the harder it becomes. Year one students want involvement from service users; second year students slightly less so and third year students do not look for involvement with service users. PQ students are generally not interested in service user involvement. (Branfield, 2009, p. 26)

This article is a reflective account of our experiences of teaching this module and not empirical research; it is therefore only possible to speculate as to the explanation
for participants’ responses. Green and Wilkes (2009, p. 192) tentatively suggest that ‘professional identity is built upon or rooted in a technical-scientific knowledge which justifies “expert status”’, such that those who are recipients of services (particularly with the emphasis on consumerism in social care) can be perceived as threatening that expertise. Molyneux and Irvine (2004) emphasise a different but equally valid point that personal testimonies and inputs from service users and carers can be emotionally draining for all concerned and that this should not be underestimated when planning and delivering education and training. They draw on the work of Forrest et al. (2000) to stress the importance of clarity about the role and purpose of service user and carer involvement in education:

We would suggest that a coherent and strategic approach has to be taken to achieve involvement in education and cannot just be “added on” to existing programmes . . . . curriculum innovations that promote user involvement have to be carefully considered, strategically planned and introduced in a way that includes the agreement of all parties, including students. (Forrest et al., 2000, p. 56)

It may be that some participants are visualising that the ‘Creating and Maintaining Partnerships’ module will enable them to improve the effectiveness of their inter-professional partnerships in terms of their own time and effort for the benefit of the agency, rather than for service users and carers. As Taylor and Le Riche (2006, p. 424) suggest ‘partnerships with service users are usually driven by ideas about empowerment while the inter-professional partnership agenda is driven by management priorities such as cost effectiveness’. As a result of this they may find the service user and carer dimension to the teaching unexpected and something they were not prepared for. As Lambley (2010, p. 7) notes ‘practice appears to be dominated by performance requirements rather than professional concerns’ and thus exposure to the expressed concerns of service users and carers may be heightening a sense of dissonance for participants.

Finally, as part of university quality assurances processes, participants are asked to complete a written module evaluation form on the last afternoon of teaching and it is this feedback that has driven us to rethink the teaching of this part of the module. As illustrated earlier, feedback is variable and although satisfaction with the teaching has generally increased over time, we have sought to be responsive to expressions of dissatisfaction. However, assignments which require participants to apply their learning to a partnership arrangement within their own work setting (submitted six weeks after the teaching has finished) often reveal some thoughtful comments and occasionally innovative developments either within their own or their team’s practice, particularly in relation to service user and carer involvement. This suggests that the service user and carer dimension within the teaching is having a more positive impact than is apparent from initial participant feedback. It may be that we need to review our mechanisms for evaluation of the module, by undertaking post-programme evaluation which allows participants to have had time to read and reflect on their learning, particularly in the context of their work setting and preparation for the assignment. Obtaining feedback at this later stage may result in a less emotional response.
Conclusion

This article has documented efforts to ensure a focus on service users and carers within a module designed to develop the knowledge and skills of social work managers to create and maintain partnerships as part of PQ education. It has explored approaches to move service users and carers from the role of ‘telling their stories’ to more central and authoritative positions and the impact this appeared to have in terms of participants’ learning.

There is much written within social work education literature about the process and impact of involving service users and carers in qualifying social work education. There is much less written about the process and experience of involving service users and carers in PQ education. This reflective account of our endeavours to pursue a focus on service users and carers in this module on partnership working has been written with the intention of generating discussion about such experiences within the social work education arena. From our experience, the approach taken within qualifying social work education is not directly transferable to the PQ context. It is only possible to speculate at this point as to the reasons why the impact should be so different. Some qualified and experienced social work managers may find service users and carers’ views particularly challenging to their own professional identity and expertise in a way that newcomers to social work education do not. Alternatively, it may be that the pressure to improve the performance of employing agencies, through adherence to organisational requirements and procedures, is causing a number of participant managers to develop an internal focus which is at the expense of genuine engagement with recipients of services.

From our perspective we remain committed to keeping both inter-agency and service user and carer perspectives within the module. This is in part due to our belief that many of the skills required to collaborate effectively inter-professionally—for example, creating a shared vision, power sharing, developing trust, role clarification and dealing with conflict and differences of opinion—are very similar to those needed to build good relationships with service users and carers (Murphy, 2004). It is also important to recognise the significance of social work managers in establishing appropriate structures, culture and practice within teams sensitive to the needs of service users and carers (Wright et al., 2006). In the process of writing this article, the difficulty of reconciling the inter-professional agenda with that of working collaboratively with service users and carers has been recognised, particularly within the time allotted to teaching this module; however, we are keen to keep exploring different approaches to the teaching as the conviction remains that this is an endeavour worth pursuing.

References


