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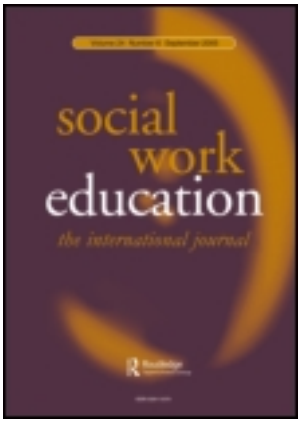

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User and Carer Involvement in Social Work Education—A University Case Study: Manipulation or Citizen Control?

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User and Carer Involvement in Social Work Education—A University Case Study: Manipulation or Citizen Control?

Lucille Allain, Helen Cosis Brown, Chantelle Danso, Jean Dillon, Pat Finnegan, Shally Gadhoke, Michael Shamash & Felicity Whittaker

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This paper provides an account of one university's experience of involving service users and carers in the delivery of the new undergraduate and postgraduate social work degrees. It poses the question as to whether user and carer involvement in social work education can be viewed as a means of promoting citizen participation or whether it is a case of manipulating relatively powerless groups. In addressing this question, service users and carers and social work tutors describe, from their own distinct perspectives, the processes in which they were both involved.

Keywords: Citizen Participation; User and Carer Involvement; Stakeholders; Communication

Introduction

Service User/Carer and Tutor Perspectives

This contribution provides an account of one university's experience of involving service users and carers in the development, realisation and operationalisation of the new UK undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in social work. Five service users and carers and three academics planned, developed and wrote this and shared their experiences. We started the process by meeting and agreeing the areas to be covered; who would work on specific sections, timescales for submission of drafts and how we would assemble the final article. We met together to jointly edit our work. It was agreed that at this session we would not substantially amend anyone's contribution but would amend minor typographic errors and jointly agree more substantial

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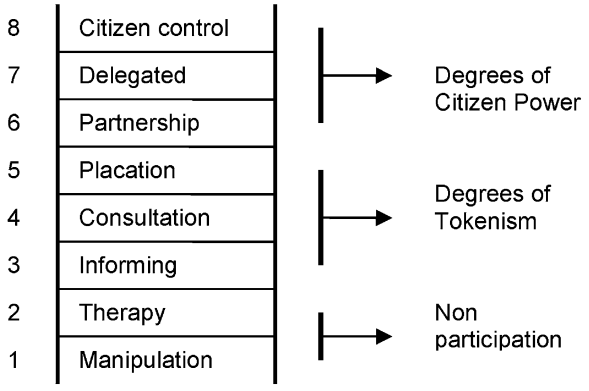
changes. Some of us felt it might be difficult for us all to sit around one computer trying to finally bring together something we all felt comfortable with. However, we found it easier than we had all anticipated and we found our debates at this stage were particularly fruitful. Each section of this contribution has both a tutor and service user/carer perspective.

When writing this we were aware that to date there has been little evaluation of service user and carer involvement in social work education (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), 2004). We therefore wanted to contribute to what will hopefully be a growing debate by undertaking a candid appraisal of our practice. Our Service User and Carer Group have met with the General Social Care Council (GSCC), at their request, as part of their evaluation of service user and carer participation in UK social work qualifications. Some members of the group have subsequently been asked to sit on a GSCC Reference Group for the post-qualifying childcare award and are therefore able to make an added contribution to service user and carer involvement in other areas.

To facilitate the process of writing this paper we drew upon Arnstein's (1971, p. 3) ladder of citizen participation which outlines a continuum of citizen participation from manipulation to citizen control. Although dated, we found the 'ladder' met our requirement for evaluating service user and carer involvement in our social work degrees.



Using Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation as an evaluative tool, we critically evaluated service user and carer involvement in Middlesex University's Social Work Programmes in the following areas:

- the Social Work Programmes' Stakeholder Group;
- development of the new degrees and the curricula;
- student selection; and
- the involvement and incorporation of service user and carers' perspectives in the making of a video on communications skills.

In doing this we were aware that involving service users and carers in the Social Work Programmes should not mean that we fell into the trap of locking service users

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and carers into fixed roles. Service users need to be seen as equal citizens who are able to move on from their former or current status and are valued for the broader contributions they can make. To illustrate this point, one of our service user representatives, who is also a trainee psychotherapist, often finds that their knowledge in this area is not recognised. In terms of Arnstein's typology, if we are to promote partnership we need to recognise service users and carers as experts, which implies sharing power and citizen control.

Service User and Carer Involvement in the Social Work Programmes' Stakeholder Group

The Tutor's Perspective

Middlesex University, along with most other UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had been providing the social work qualification, the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) at undergraduate and postgraduate levels for some years. From 2002 they had to engage with the development of the new social work degree. Once the new requirements had been published (Department of Health, 2002; GSCC, 2002) most HEIs became involved in several years of development. At Middlesex we were accredited as a university to grant the new degrees in social work in July 2002, we validated our undergraduate degree in May 2003 and our postgraduate degree in February 2004, and both were approved by the GSCC.

At every stage of this process we were required to evidence the involvement of service users and carers (GSCC, 2002). At Middlesex University, as part of the accreditation of the HEI process, we established our new Social Work Stakeholder Group, which comprised: university members; student representatives; service user and carer representatives; and social care agency partners.

The question of who should we involve as service user and carer representatives involved careful consideration. We did not want to fall into either of the categories that Arnstein calls 'non-participation' or 'tokenism' but rather wanted to make a real attempt at 'partnership' (Arnstein, 1971, p. 3). We believed that we were most likely to achieve this where we were able to identify service users and carers we already had established working relationships with and where all parties had found those working relationships to be sufficiently comfortable and effective. We thus recruited two carers and three service users who met those criteria. All those recruited also had experience of membership of and participation within other organisations as service user and carer representatives and had developed skills and knowledge associated with those roles. Most particularly, we recruited people who had excellent communications skills, commitment, energy, ideas and integrity.

Service User/Carer Perspective

No truer words can be said to describe the aptitude of the Service Users/Carers Group. It was a wonder for most of us as to how comfortable, valued and crucial we

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were made to feel as contributors to this programme—but we wondered if we would actually be involved?

On attendance at the first meeting the group as a whole were quiet, taking in the many names of the 'professionals' around us and listening to the 'jargon'. Little was said. As a result it was agreed between the service users/carers and another member of the Stakeholder Group that the University had to look at additional ways of 'getting across' the valuable messages from our experiences. After all, the purpose of us being part of this working group was to help positively influence the teaching programme designed for prospective social workers.

It was agreed that the Service Users/Carers Group:

- should be provided with all relevant course materials and other details to better understand the admissions process, content of the Programmes and how the curricula would be taught to students;
- should be provided with a glossary of commonly used words and abbreviations in relation to the Programmes;
- should be given the opportunity to meet prior to the Stakeholder Group meetings, to clarify anything that we were unsure about from the minutes of the last meeting, to discuss what issues we would raise at the forthcoming Stakeholder Group and to briefly discuss other ways in which the group could contribute to the design of the Social Work Programmes; and that
- 'Service Users/Carers Feedback' should be included as a standing item on the agenda.

Since then the group has gone from strength to strength. The service users/carers have all bonded well and have consistently attended Stakeholder Group meetings. Continuity of the service users/carers has meant that we have formed a good working relationship with the other 'professionals', comprehend what is being said (jargon) and feel more able to participate at meetings.

Better understanding of the Programmes as a whole has led the group to recognise that they can also be an asset in the admission process and in 2005 the Service Users/Carers Group became involved in admissions. Our creativity has resulted in the production of a video that documents some of the service users'/carers' experiences as part of the 'Communication Skills' modules on the Programmes.

Being a part of the Service User/Carer Group from the start has highlighted that there are always ways of involving our experienced group, although these ways may not always seem obvious to begin with.

Service User and Carer Involvement in the Development of the New Degrees and the Curricula

Tutor's Perspective

The GSCC requirement that service users and carers are consulted 'to make sure their needs and opinions are reflected in the design and development of courses' (GSCC, 2002) could have been interpreted in a number of ways. As members of the Social

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Work Stakeholder Group our service user and carer representatives were integral to the overall development of both the undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

We held two day events in addition to our ordinary Stakeholder Group half day meetings. These were held in February 2003, in relation to the undergraduate degree and in October 2003 for the postgraduate degree.

The February day event, involved all the stakeholders: partner agencies; student representatives; service user and carer representatives and university staff. We also invited the GSCC Regional Inspector and the Department of Health Practice Learning Task Force 'Change Agent'. The February and October events followed similar structures. The proposed degrees were presented and the participants made invaluable contributions through challenges and concrete suggestions. The October day also focussed on the role of each constituent group of the Stakeholder Group in the development and maintenance of the new degrees in relation to quality assurance, management, learning and teaching and assessment. One of the points fed back from the Service Users/Carers Group was the need for the University to take on board what stakeholders say and apply it. It has been interesting in the writing of this contribution that we realised that we had not always communicated what had been taken on board and applied, including quite specific changes to curriculum content.

Beresford & Croft (2004) emphasise the importance of the individual practitioner as a potential 'positive force for change' both at an organisational level and most importantly at an individual level as they impact on service users and carers. We have found the involvement of service users and carers at the very beginning of social workers' careers, in contributing to the development of the curricula in the qualifying programmes, to be a potentially powerful process. It is one way of trying to make sure that degrees are focussed on trying to facilitate the development of future social work practitioners who will act as a 'positive force for change' and work towards improving outcomes for both service users and carers.

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Service User/Carer Perspective

As a member of the Service Users/Carers Group it was interesting, and flattering, to be asked to join the Stakeholder Group. However, I realised at the first event in February 2003 that I had not asked enough about how we would actually contribute, other than being present at the Stakeholder Group meetings. Perhaps a prior discussion with members would have helped me to have more to contribute.

For the first couple of group meetings some of us felt rather uncertain about what we had to give to this knowledgeable gathering of insiders. The acronyms were also daunting, but swiftly made clear by a list of their origins! With helpful support and encouragement, in the pre-group meeting discussions, I began to see how we might contribute. Making a video on interviewing and, particularly, being involved in the assessment of applicants for the Social Work Programmes was important, and made it possible to define more clearly the qualities needed to be a good social worker.

In terms of Arnstein's ladder, 'partnership' describes our status. This seems to be an appropriately useful role given we are neither university nor employer

representatives. The encouragement we have been given makes it seem reasonable to have a role influencing the Stakeholder Group's decision making processes. As our confidence and integration grows, we should be in a position increasingly to contribute. Personally, I'd hope to be able to underline the importance in social work practice of the concept of clients' empowerment as central to the degrees' curricula. It is affirming to know that our contributions were acted on in a number of areas. To give an example, during a new degree development day our group suggested a number of changes to curricula content, which I am pleased to say have been incorporated into the teaching. Some of us are fairly far removed from training, and it would be enlightening to meet students more often. I wonder, too, whether it might be possible to sit in on some teaching sessions, which would give us another helpful perspective and would be useful for the evaluation purposes of the Social Work Programmes.

Service User and Carer Involvement in Student Selection

Tutor's Perspective

The involvement of service users and carers in Middlesex University's Social Work Programmes' student selection procedures has been both a gradual and incremental process. The preliminary Stakeholder Group meetings and the development days for the new degrees provided useful forums for canvassing service user and carer representatives' views on important aspects of student selection. They stressed the importance of students entering social work training having appropriate personal qualities and the 'right' kind of attitudes, which relates to one of the key Department of Health entry requirements: all social work education providers must 'satisfy themselves that all entrants possess appropriate personal and intellectual qualities to be social workers' (Department of Health, 2002, p. 2).

Meetings between service user and carer representatives, the course director and the admissions tutor also played an important part in refining ideas about levels of service user and carer involvement. One key consideration related to the high demand for places on the qualifying programmes with the ratio for BA and MA applications to entrants being 1:44 and 1:13, respectively (Dillon, 2004, p. 7). Careful thought therefore needed to be given to the logistical and resource implications of involving service users and carers in, for example, the short-listing of applicants for interview and the conducting of individual interviews.

Another important consideration was the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) deadline decision date, which falls at the end of March each year, and by which time universities are expected to have completed and informed UCAS of the outcomes of interviews. In light of these constraints and in the interests of consistency and equity, a decision was made not to involve service users and carers in short-listing or interviewing processes. Instead, it was agreed that service user and carer representatives would mark the candidates' written tests with tutors and attend and contribute to student selection panel meetings by providing feedback and by

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being involved in decision-making processes. To this end, service user and carer representatives were involved in devising a service user/carer written test assessment proforma and from January 2005 played a key role in determining which candidates were offered a place on the Social Work Programmes.

This involvement is welcomed by all stakeholders and will be invaluable in seeking to ensure that appropriate students are selected for social work training. This development is also supported by research and from wide consultation with service users and carers across different groups, which indicates that 'there is a broad consensus on the personal qualities that service users and carers consider essential for social work' (SCIE, 2004, p. 35; Anfilogoff *et al.*, 2002; Barnes, 2002). Service user and carer representatives are therefore ideally placed to assess the personal qualities of potential students, and in the process may make an important contribution to future improvements in services when such students qualify. In assessing service user and carer involvement in student selection, according to Arnstein's typology of citizen participation, there is evidence of consultation and partnership working through involvement in key aspects of student selection and decision-making processes.

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Service User/Carer Perspective

I am one of a group of five users/carers who sit on the Stakeholder Group for the Social Work Programmes at Middlesex University. Initially I found the workings of a university department a bit bewildering and took a little time to learn to interpret the jargon. To help us, the Chair from the University, in discussion with us, initiated a system of helpful pre-meetings, which were preparatory to the Stakeholder Group meetings.

I have always felt that we as users/carers are listened to with respect and honesty by the others on the Stakeholder Group. After discussing in our pre-meetings how we might bring our considerable experience as users and carers to bear on the deliberations of the Stakeholder Group, we raised this issue at one of the Stakeholder Group meetings. Participation in the selection of students for the BA and MA Programmes was fairly quickly identified by the academic staff and ourselves as an area where we could have an impact. A lot of discussion focused on the written test. The test had previously been termed a 'literacy test', which I felt was misnamed since it tested much more than just literacy.

Therefore a decision was made to rename the test. I have been surprised by the uneven standards of literacy evident in the applications and support efforts to raise levels. As a carer I have felt devalued by correspondence from a link worker which was so badly written that its meaning was unclear. I have looked at the written test and think it is well designed and potentially revealing about an applicant and sufficiently challenging.

Users and carers have now been invited to jointly assess the written test from the 2005 student intake. A proforma for marking the test was designed by the Service User/Carer Group alongside the University. I also sat in on the final part of the selection process for a group of seven applicants and found the discussion fair and

reasonable. I was impressed that applicants who did not get offered places, but showed potential, were advised where their skills and knowledge need topping up by the admissions tutor.

A decision has also been made to invite one member of our group to sit on each interview panel in the future. I feel our group is very incrementally and gently being drawn into the admissions and selection process.

Making a Video

Tutor's Perspective

Creating a video with service users and carers evolved as part of the process of involving service users and carers in all aspects of the Social Work Programmes, including teaching and learning. The teaching of communication skills has always been a key component of the curriculum for social work students at Middlesex University. The endorsement of the importance of this area of practice in the Requirements for Social Work Training for the new degree (Department of Health, 2002) gave rise to discussions about how the teaching and assessment of communication skills could be further developed. The service users and carers agreed to participate in the making of a video. Written consent was obtained from all members of the Service Users/Carers Group with clear information about who would have access to the video and what it would be used for. The focus of the video was developed with the group and was essentially about service users' and carers' experiences of being at the receiving end of social workers' communication skills. The aim was to create a teaching tool, which would be used in teaching social work students undertaking the Communication Skills modules.

Skills video laboratories used in teaching communication skills are valuable in offering students the experience of practising their skills in a safe environment. However, the added benefit of hearing directly from service users and carers emphasises and makes real the importance of partnership. Arnstein (1971, p. 5) describes partnership as sharing power through a process of negotiation. In creating the video this was certainly the case as we debated the structure of the video, how it should be filmed, who should ask questions and how it would be edited. Our initial optimism that the task would be completed in just one session was short lived as we realised the complexities, both in terms of content and structure plus technical matters.

Making the video and discussing what is important in terms of communication involved wide ranging discussions regarding religious and cultural issues; sincerity; integrity; authenticity; honesty; punctuality; reliability; listening skills and the use of probes. Students also debate all of these issues and it is anticipated that they will find it beneficial to have service users' and carers' perspectives. The importance of these areas are outlined by SCIE (2004), who argue that further work regarding transcultural communication skills and user involvement is an area within which further research and development is required.

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It is hoped that the making of this video will support learning and enable students to develop good interpersonal and reflective listening and intervention skills, clarity about how to communicate effectively and awareness of the importance of partnership.

Service User/Carer Perspective

When asked to make a video on communication skills for social work students from a service user and carer perspective, I was filled with excitement and nervousness at the enormity of the task, facing my fear of the video! Here was a perfect opportunity to communicate our views and feelings to a wider audience.

We started by making a list of areas we felt were important to cover in the video. This ranged from the initial greeting, different cultural norms, authenticity, to language, dress and boundaries. Sensitivity and awareness was a common theme underpinning this, as was seeing the person as an individual without any preconceived ideas. Our discussions revealed the different views we held. There was debate around the terms 'client' and 'service user', some preferring one, whilst others liked the other. We found it more difficult than we thought it would be. We made some changes and learnt as we went along. In the making of the video there were discussions about what clothes looked best on set, where people with quieter voices should sit, the seriousness of our voices coming across enough and whether the social worker academics took up too much valuable space. We've learnt that really working inclusively takes time. After all, professional video-makers do not just make a video in one take!

Watching videos made by ex-service user groups touched some of us quite deeply. Being a close group made this easier to deal with. We gel well, are reflective, open and honest with each other. However, I did not anticipate what was to come. I was about to be faced with my past. Going through videos made by other service user groups, there in front of me on the screen was my ex-social worker. She hadn't aged a bit! I felt taken back in time, lots of memories coming back to me, remembering what she was accountable for as my social worker. I soon realised that my ex-social worker was a colleague of a member of our group and held in high regard. I felt very uncomfortable. I experienced people jumping to her defence when I was asked 'was she a good social worker?' and I answered 'No'. It created an interesting dynamic in the group, for the first time showing the divide in the group between service users and carers. The dynamic in the group was mirroring my experience of being in Care. I felt my experience, my reality, was being undermined. I was feeling angry and defensive. The only person I felt could relate to what I was feeling was the other service user in the room. My fear in writing this is that I do not want this to be used to fuel the debate against service user involvement. However, it also demonstrates some of the real complexities of working in partnership.

In summary, our hope is that this video will contribute in informing and shaping social work practice. This can only be done with true citizen participation.

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Conclusion

Service User and Carer Perspectives

In our discussion/preparatory meetings we have raised issues such as the power relationship between social workers and users and carers, which in practice is always tipped in favour of the social worker. Users and carers are very aware of this imbalance and feel disempowered by it. Social workers need above all else to listen to users and carers and give consideration to their views in the process of developing a working relationship/partnership and must always be honest with users and carers (Turner, 2003). As a group we will be looking for these abilities/attributes in applicants to the Social Work Programmes in our role in student selection. As service users and carers we have felt on numerous occasions disbelieved, devalued and frustrated and felt that the needs of institutions like social services departments should give more priority to those they are meant to serve. Maybe we can initiate some discussion within the university as to how social workers can safely challenge this.

Finally, having critically evaluated several areas of our involvement with the Social Work Programmes at Middlesex University, using Arnstein's ladder of participation, our conclusions are:

- that the Service User/Carer Group started at rung one (manipulation) and initially felt we were a public relations vehicle *but*
- we moved relatively quickly to rung four (consultation) *and then*
- to rung five (placation) where we feel that we have been given every assistance in articulating our priorities.

Service User and Carer and Tutor Perspectives

We have reached a 'territory', now, in our involvement of service users and carers with our Social Work Programmes that is neither 'manipulation' nor is it 'citizen control'. Currently we feel we have reached rung six (partnership) where we are just beginning to negotiate a more effective participatory role.

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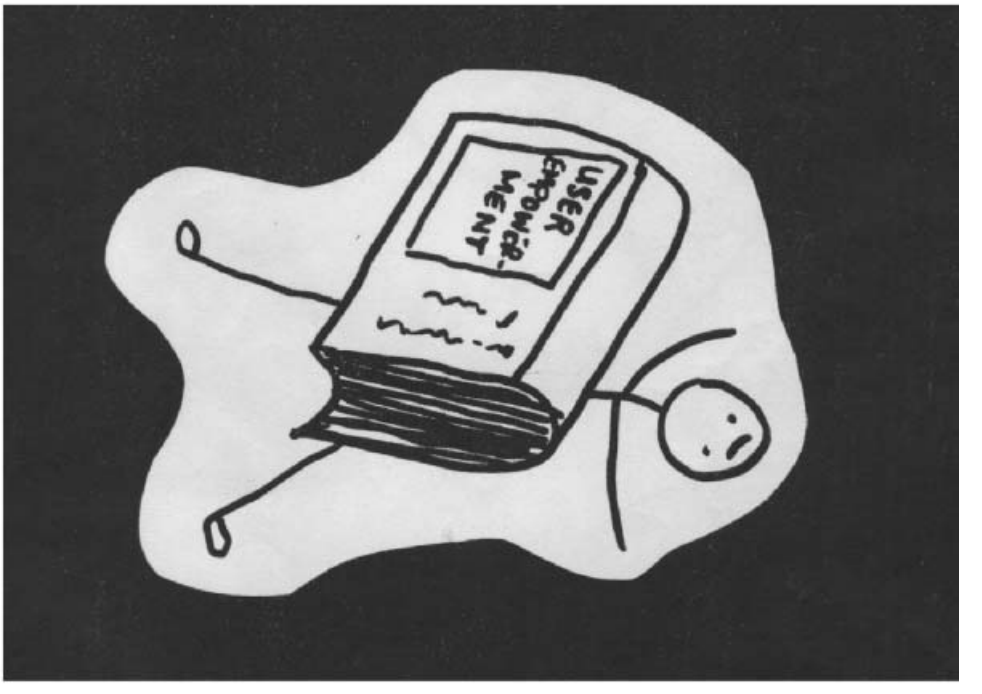

…. But their <u>process</u> is often about denial.