

For making it meaningful: participatory practices in social work education

OVERVIEW:

Social work practitioners are increasingly required to develop, support and evaluate projects that draw on the participation of service users (consumers) and, where appropriate, their carers. Over the past six years, I have been involved in the development and teaching of *WS4503/WS5603 Social Work and Mental Health*. This subject has offered students at James Cook University the unique experience of a subject designed through an innovative partnership approach between myself and consumers of mental health services. The challenges and the rewards of participatory practices are modelled and reflected in the subject content, teaching and evaluation processes. Because of this, the curricula, resources and delivery of the subject reflect my command of the field of social work practice and social work education.

WS4503 and WS5603 (the extension subject for Master of Social Work Professional Qualifying) are core subjects for final year students of the social work degree and as such, the material is subject to scrutiny by the accreditation committee of the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW). I was invited to be involved in the re-development of *WS4503* in 2005 based on student feedback that the existing subject required further grounding in current social work practice directions. In particular, the emerging demands for meaningful service user participation in the design and delivery of mental health services seemed to me to be an important element missing from current approaches. Drawing on some 15 years of work in the human services sector, I began by bringing together past students of the subject, now professionals in the field; social workers practicing with consumers of mental health services and finally, the consumers and carers themselves. Whilst consultative and participatory practices are found in social work organisations around Australia, in social work education this step marked a dramatic departure from traditional subject development. Early in the process a commitment was made to ensure the participation of consumers was not only meaningful but was also modelled for students throughout the subject resources. I ensured the content of the subject, the required readings and structure of the internal and external teaching plans were workshopped during regular meetings with an advisory committee of interested consumer representatives. The new subject was received with enthusiasm by the students of 2006 and by practitioners (including employers and former students) involved in the initial consultations.

As an educator committed to reflective practice, I developed an action research project to ensure the subject could be reviewed and updated annually, and the new orientation sustained over time. Again I created an innovative partnership model with members of the original advisory committee of consumers from mental health services that allowed for new consumer representatives to become involved as the years progressed. *As a result, WS4503/WS5603 offers a unique example of participatory practice to students about to graduate and enter the field of social work.* Students are able to engage with a subject shaped by the meaningful participation of consumers, with a frank discussion about the opportunity and challenges meaningful participation brings. This allows for a powerful learning experience that not only seeks to 'contest hegemony and unmask power' (Brookfield, 2005) but provide practical demonstrations of how this might be applied. In this manner, my command of the field has been translated directly into a set of materials and an approach that contributes to students' learning.

The JCU *WS4503* subject remains the only one in Australia that has been able to include the voices of consumers in every stage of the subject, from development to implementation and annual evaluation. As such it is recognised by the AASW as a model subject for social work and mental health.

The Department of Social Work and Community Services *is committed to education and practice which are informed by critical insights into structural inequalities and inequities and which contribute at both individual and collective levels to a socially just and sustainable society.* My use of consumer representatives to inform and reflect on every stage of the subject delivery explicitly addresses the inequities experienced by consumers of mental health services and provides a best practice example of rights-based social work practice.

CRITERION 2: Development of curricula, resources and services that reflect a command of the field

This section is divided into two aspects: the field of social work and mental health; and the field of social work education.

A command of the field of social work and mental health

At the heart of key policy and practice direction of the State and Federal Mental Health Services since the 1990s has been a commitment to the idea of meaningful participation, that is, a commitment to facilitating the involvement of the 'real' experts of mental illness in the design, delivery and evaluation of services (Cairney, Chettle, Clark, Davis, Gosling, Harvey, Jephcote, Labana, Lymbery, Pendred & Russell, 2006; Bland, Reneuf & Tullgren, 2010; Australian Health Ministers, 2009). The purpose of participation stems from a wholesale ideological shift from the idea of professionals as 'expert'.

Social work, with its commitment to principles of social justice and human rights, has been ideally positioned to develop and implement some of the most successful participation projects in Australia (Bland, Reneuf & Tullgren, 2010). Such a shift has presented a real challenge to social work education regarding how to teach the ideas of partnership and create opportunities for the students to develop skills and strategies for involving consumers in respectful and appropriate ways. It is a challenge I embraced when asked to re-develop *WS4503: Social Work and Mental Health*, a final year subject in the Bachelor of Social Work degree.

Accordingly, my goal in the development of *WS4503* was to ensure the students were exposed to the voice and wisdom of consumers throughout the subject. Rather than studying 'how' to engage with the consumer from a distance, students are required to rethink the polarised dynamics of traditional teaching practices that may replicate a 'them' (the consumer) and an 'us' (the social worker). The impact of engaging each week in a subject that continually returns to the consumer voice for clarification aligns with the principles of critical theory for teaching and learning (Brookfield, 2005; Morrow & Torres, 2002). For students, such a dramatic departure from the usual teaching and learning materials has contributed to powerful learning outcomes.

I still consider WS4503 to be the most life-changing subject of the four years of study. I got it. I really got it. And now I bring it to my practice. Thanks Beth (Personal correspondence, student from 2009).

Awesome, loved the structure, I actually enjoyed the readings. Thanks again. Also the little bits in the study guide, the comments from people who are currently experiencing issues surrounding mental illnesses, were fantastic. It's all well and good to read and understand an article but real life experiences I think help to bring home the fact these are real people, experiencing real things (SFS feedback 2006).

Involving consumers in the planning, development and evaluation of subject materials is a radical departure from the traditional approach of bringing in a guest speaker to discuss their experiences, 'like an exhibit on display' (Baldwin & Sadd, 2006; Crisp, Anderson, Orme & Lister, 2005). Drawing on ideas from the UK, Canada and the United States, I asked consumer representatives in the advisory group to respond to the questions: *what makes a social worker different? What do you want from a newly graduated social worker?* Without exception, the responses focussed on the need for social workers to challenge 'them and us' binary understandings that infuse the professional workplace. Interestingly, during my consultations with employer groups from both mental health specific services and more generalist agencies, the same concern was expressed. In addition, it was requested that more detail be included in the subject about practical strategies that may be used to respond to the broad area of practice required by new graduates, including understanding mental health promotion, mental illness prevention and skills for responding to mental illness crises. Recent graduates acknowledged a sense of confusion regarding how to actually include consumers in a meaningful way - a funding requirement for many projects.

I brought back the combined data from the consultations to the consumer advisory committee, alongside the AASW requirements for the subject. Together, the group of 12 consumer representatives and I debated, discussed and agreed upon a 13 week program we believed addressed the concerns of former students, future employers, the AASW and indeed the consumers themselves. **The result has been a subject that not only has enjoyed high ratings in feedback from students, but was invited to be a showcase example at the 2010 AASW Social Work and Mental Health Educator's Forum held in Melbourne.**

A command of social work education

The involvement of consumers and their carers in social work education, while in its infancy in Australia, is seen as best practice in other countries (Schyett & Diehl, 2004; Warren, 2007). In Britain, the involvement of consumers and carers in the development and evaluation of curricula has been seen as 'mainstream educational activity' (Yeung, Yuet-Wah Echo and Ng, Siu-Man, 2011). The rationale for this has been that social work students are able to experience first hand the value of integrating the experiences of consumers into their practice. At the same time, students are actively involved in emancipatory practice, with consumers positioned as the voice of authority and knowledge (Ager, Dow & Gee, 2005; Bassett, Campbell and Anderson, 2006). The learning outcomes for students are such that participatory practice is a mandatory requirement for social work education throughout the United Kingdom (Agnew & Duffy, 2010).

Involving consumers and their carers however requires a more sophisticated process than simply inviting token representatives to 'present' to students. This is particularly so in regional and rural areas where issues of confidentiality are significantly more complex. Discussing a personal journey of accessing mental health services still leads to risks of stigma and judgement for many Australians (Harries, 2009).

The redevelopment of this subject to include the voices of consumers required that I draw upon my skills as a social work practitioner and additionally that I meet standards for academic and pedagogical integrity. I conducted a literature review of scholarly papers from Australia and abroad to ensure the new subject outcomes would meet the educational needs of social work students. The absence of consumer involvement in Australian social work education appeared to me an obvious gap. While individual consumer representatives have been active in co-teaching and assessment processes in La Trobe, Monash University and the University of Tasmania, there was no university at the time involving a range of consumer representatives in every stage of subject material development.

In 2007 the AASW funded a pilot project to review all social work qualifying courses across Australia in order to work towards a shared understanding of accreditation requirements. **JCU, able to showcase the newly re-written subject, came in for high praise from the reviewer and from the AASW itself (Gerrand, 2008). The involvement of consumers in meaningful ways was seen as both ground breaking in Australia and an exemplar of practice. I was invited to become part of a national working party of Social Work and Mental Health educators.** In 2010 the focus of the two day working party meeting in Melbourne was to consider how consumers could be included more meaningfully in social work subjects. The strengths and the challenges presented by participatory practices were explored, using my work in *WS4503* as a practice example.

SUSTAINABILITY, CONTRIBUTION AND RECOGNITION:

Between 2005 and 2011 my work on *WS4503/WS5603* has influenced student learning, their engagement and the overall student experience of the Bachelor of Social Work study. Student *Feedback on Subject* and student *Feedback on Teaching* scores have remained excellent since 2006. Student Feedback on Teaching relating to the subject understanding, motivation and overall quality consistently rated above 90% in the *outstanding or more than acceptable* range.

I believe this will be one of the most useful subjects to my competence as a social worker. The text and subject were developed in a manner that promoted knowledge and understand (sic) and focussed on key learning area... thank you very much. (student, SFT feedback 2006)

Great job linking to professional practice (student feedback, 2007)

Beth is a credit to JCU. The subject was more than relevant and Beth's explanations were concurrent with recent issues with client/workplace. Thank you Beth! (student SFT feedback, 2008)

Thank you Beth for continually bringing us back to the point of it all – 'the clients' and for reminding us that we too are the one and the same. You have inspired us and recentred us. This has been

our favourite subject – without exception – not just this year but throughout the degree. Thank you.
(card from internal students, Cairns Campus 2009).

In addition to the formal JCU evaluation tools, I have rigorously evaluated the subject each year, inviting students to provide informal feedback through email, written and focus group meetings. Recent graduates of the Social Work degree (some of whom are now in the position to offer social work field education supervision themselves) have made contact with me, to thank me for demonstrating the difference between a tokenistic interpretation of 'participation' and a genuine, meaningful partnership process.

Beth, I have been able to convince my Management Committee that such a process is possible but only if we really embrace real participation. You inspired me and I will never forget the lessons I learned in WS4503. (personal communication from student of 2008, received 2010)

In 2009, Professor Robert Bland, the recognised leader in Australian mental health and social work education, completed a peer review on the Teaching and Learning materials I had developed. His review included:

I thought the use of consumer voices in the study guide was a commendable and creative innovation.... I was impressed that the lecturer was able to integrate the consumer voice throughout the subject. (Prof. Robert Bland).

CONCLUDING STATEMENT:

Given my philosophy and intentions for the design of the subject, for me the most meaningful feedback has been received from the members of the consumer advisory committee who participated in a formal evaluation process in October 2010. The committee spoke of their satisfaction with the values and practices of JCU social workers who have graduated in the years since 2006. The consumers of course have a particular insight into the way James Cook University graduates practice; these students are now the practitioners the consumer group interact with for therapeutic and other support. The Advisory Committee rightly takes pride in their contribution to influencing such change. The evaluation report also linked the perceived changes in professional responses from social workers in North Queensland back to the subject, WS4503/WS5603 in general and my commitment to the principles of participatory practices specifically.

You can be proud, Beth, of the social workers you have influenced and inspired over recent years. You have been a living example of gentle, respectful practice and it shows in your students. (Taylor D. Advisory Committee member 2006-2010).

Affirmation has come from the local field of social work practitioners. Such affirmation again speaks of the value of rigorous consultations and evaluations in partnership with services, key agencies and service users. *Thank you, Beth. You've managed to re-write a subject to include the needs of us, the employer body, the needs of consumers and given students a firmer grounding for practice in the field of mental health.* (Mark Fakes, Director of Social Work, Institute of Mental Health Services, Townsville)

WS4503/WS5603 has achieved recognition from the field of social work in North Queensland, the Professional Accreditation Body, the Australian Association of Social Workers and from students of James Cook University. The subject's success is directly linked to my commitment to the use of participatory processes and reflective practice. As such it represents a command of the field of social work and of social work education.