

Developing the Writing Skills of Social Work Students: Connecting Academic and Professional Expertise

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Abstract

Undergraduate social work education in England requires the completion of the necessary academic credits for an honours degree, alongside the demonstration of the necessary standards and competencies associated with a professional award. This requires a challenging and diverse programme of study. However, the skills necessary for successful academic enquiry complement those required for effective practice. In particular, academic writing skills support effective professional communication and research skills allow for evidence-based practice. This paper describes the development of academic skills within a new undergraduate social work programme at a UK university, designed to meet the needs of a diverse and atypical student cohort. Having recognised the flaws in the early delivery of the programme, a revised curriculum has placed the development of academic research and writing skills at its core.

Introduction

The Care Standards Act (Great Britain Parliament 2000) made provision for the formation of a regulatory body for social care in England. As a result, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) was established in 2001, with the responsibility for keeping a register of social workers and social care workers, establishing a code of practice for social care workers, and approving educational programmes. These developments contributed to significant changes in social work education. From 2003 onward, all social workers were to be educated to a minimum of graduate level. This gave rise to a number of new undergraduate social work degree programmes, opening up the profession to a cohort of students who previously could not have readily accessed such training without prior undergraduate study, and who therefore had notably different academic histories and qualifications than postgraduate-level cohorts.

Having recently celebrated its centenary of social work education, the University of Birmingham has a long tradition of training within the profession. However, the introduction of an undergraduate programme in October 2003 required considerable reflections on the content and style of delivery of the established social work curriculum. Drawing on our early experiences of delivering the new programme, this paper reflects on the particular educational needs recognised amongst the new undergraduate cohort with regard to critical academic thinking and writing, and the systems developed to enable students to improve these skills.

Academic Skills as Core Social Work Competencies

Social work education is multidimensional (Tsang 2006). Social work degrees are professional programmes which combine academic study with professional practice learning. Successful completion of the programme leads to both an academic award and a professional qualification. As such the curriculum has to be designed to reflect both academic concerns and the skills needed for future professional practice. It is important therefore that social work programmes are able to help students to integrate their understanding of contextual, critical, explanatory and practical issues, and enable them to become accountable, reflective, critical and evaluative (QAA 2008).

The development of academic skills is clearly a necessary component of all undergraduate degree programmes. They are the skills needed for effective learning, enquiry, analysis and writing. However, these are also skills (of investigation, critical analysis and effective written communication) that are of major importance in the professional settings in which social work is practised (Brown and Rutter 2008). The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Benchmark Statement for Social Work (QAA 2008), which establishes the expectations for degree programmes within the discipline, is recognised as one of 'the most complex' of those produced by the QAA (Burgess and Irving 2005: 21). The Statement suggests that graduates should be able to integrate their skills in relation to five core areas: problem solving; communication; working with others; personal and professional development; information and communications technology (ICT) and numerical skills (QAA 2008). Of particular relevance here are communication skills. Section 5.6 suggests that: 'Honours graduates in social work should be able to communicate clearly, accurately and precisely (in an appropriate medium) with individuals and groups in a range of formal and informal situations' (QAA 2008: 12). Clear communication requires an array of skills and competencies, a number of which clearly relate to a set of skills that might be developed through academic writing, including the ability to:

- 'follow and develop an argument and evaluate the viewpoints of, and evidence presented by, others';
- 'write accurately and clearly in styles adapted to the audience, purpose and context of the communication'; and
- 'present conclusions verbally and on paper, in a structured form, appropriate to the audience for which these have been prepared' (QAA 2008: 12–13).

As well as addressing the requirements of the QAA, social work programmes must also incorporate the National Occupational Standards for Social Work (GSCC 2002), which outline the skills, knowledge and values required for 'best practice' within the profession (see Burgess and Irving 2005: 21–22). These requirements acknowledge the importance of writing and research skills, and the ability to argue effectively. For example, Key Role 5, Unit 16 addresses the need to manage, present and share records and reports, which includes the ability to '[m]aintain accurate, complete, accessible, and up to date records and reports' and to '[p]rovide evidence for judgements and decisions' (GSCC 2002).

The last two decades have been marked by a reduction in direct work with service users and an increase in bureaucratisation (Munro 2004 and Blewett, Lewis and Tunstill 2007) making the skills of written communication increasingly important. Samuel (2005) described how 'Social Care Professionals [are] Overwhelmed by Paperwork', reporting findings which suggest that a majority of social care professionals spent more than 60% of their time on administrative work rather than direct client contact. This is reaffirmed by a recent article in the *British Journal of Social Work*, which perceived 'Changes in the Form of Knowledge in Social Work: From the "Social" to the "Informational"' (Parton 2008). In this article, Parton suggests that changes in social work policy and practice mean that currently what is referred to as social work knowledge 'is primarily related to the way that we gather, share, store, manipulate and use "information"' (Parton 2008: 261–262). This suggests that a varied and complex set of skills are required.

A further driver in the development of social work education has been the recent emphasis on social work research, and the associated development of research knowledge and skills amongst both social work academics and social work practitioners (Young and Burgess 2005). The Social Work and

Social Policy subject group of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) suggests that 'research mindedness is a necessary attribute for all practitioners'; one which is seen to include: the ability to use knowledge and research to reflect critically; the ability to use research to inform practice and challenge discrimination; and the ability to use research to theorise from practice (SWAP n.d.). In this context, social work educators have a remit to develop 'research mindedness' amongst their students.

The Educational Needs of Undergraduate Social Work Students

Whilst conscious of the complex and competing requirements of social work education, there must also be concern about the particular needs associated with the academic histories of undergraduate social work students. Prior to 2003, social work students at the University of Birmingham were postgraduate and were therefore expected to arrive with a set of skills regarding critical thinking and writing, developed through their undergraduate study, which could then be transferred to a social work context. Undergraduate students clearly arrive without such developed skills, and therefore need support to develop as 'university students' in parallel to developing their competencies as social work practitioners. This provides a particular challenge in balancing multiple pressures and uncertainties amongst students, who therefore need to learn two sets of complex skills in order to be successful in their studies.

This challenge is amplified by the diverse student body attracted to undergraduate social work programmes, which is not reflective of the more traditional image of the university student. As Eborall and Garmeson (2001: 36) note, 'social work tends to attract older students who are more likely to have greater financial commitments: in 1998, the median age for applicants to social work programmes was 32 and 75% were over 25'. This includes an untypically large proportion of students who have been out of formal education for prolonged periods, and have instead often recently been in some form of social care practice.

However, these challenges also offer particular opportunities. As evidenced in the previous section, the skill sets required for successful academic study and effective social work practice are far from contradictory. Addressing both skill sets in parallel provides the opportunity to develop them in a complementary fashion, allowing the practice relevance of academic study to be understood, and the skills and strengths developed by students with professional practice experience to be recognised, reflected on and transferred to their undergraduate study. For these students the transitions between professional writing and academic writing are multifarious. The development of the undergraduate social work programme at the University of Birmingham has sought to recognise and respond to this opportunity. Learning how to identify and utilise transferable skills, whilst addressing 'gaps' in the core academic skills required for successful academic study, has been an iterative process over the early years of the programme. In the remainder of this paper we describe two key stages of this development.

The Experiences of the First Cohort

The first cohort of students on the University of Birmingham's undergraduate social work degree completed their studies in summer 2007. During their final year, students were required to complete a module titled 'Research and reflective practice', the assessment for which was a detailed portfolio involving several tasks.

This module raised significant anxieties amongst the students. These were linked to fears about completing an assignment which was unusual in as much as most previous assignments had been in essay format. Also, the tasks involved the use of research skills which had not previously been applied in an explicit way – though the staff group would argue that many of these skills had been developed implicitly. Within the module feedback one student reflected this anxiety by noting that: 'Too much is too much, especially when none of us are experienced researchers'.

What was apparent from student feedback during and after the module, was that many felt that they had not had the 'basic' input in previous years of the programme, which they perceived to be a

necessary foundation for the skills they were being asked to enhance during their final year. Module evaluation noted that the most useful elements of the module were the sessions on searching for sources, using journals and accessing electronic resources. Whilst these had been delivered in the context of the students having to develop a literature review to inform a research proposal, students identified that these skills would have been valuable throughout their study, in the writing of assignments and in developing evidence-informed practice. As such, there was a sense that these elements needed to be developed explicitly earlier in the programme, rather than assuming that these skills were independently developed by the students in preparing for assignments or by accessing available support provided by the University's various information and academic services.

In making recommendations for module development, the students therefore made two clear and repeated recommendations: that information on searching for information should come in year one; and that skills regarding research, critical thinking and reflection, should be explicitly developed throughout the programme.

Embedding Academic Enquiry in Years One and Two

In response to the clear messages from module evaluations, and drawing on the experiences of students and staff involved, teaching in years one and two of the programme was revised. This revision had two key components: the development of research-focused modules in years one and two of the programme; and the development of the academic tutoring programme. A new module was developed in year one, entitled 'Research for evidence based learning'. This module examines the core skills for academic enquiry, including: exploring potential sources of evidence; effective searching of the literature; using evidence in developing assignments; and appropriate referencing. These skills for academic writing are considered alongside professional skills, such as critical thinking, reflective practice, and professional writing (such as the production of court reports), therefore demonstrating the integration of professional practice skills with the development of academic study.

Much of the teaching is delivered through supported self-directed learning using online resources. Such teaching methods encourage independent learning and help create more effective learners (Brown and Atkins 1988), and therefore deliberately demarcate the expectations and the approaches to learning within a university environment from those perhaps associated with schools and colleges. This has several additional benefits. For example, once made available the resources are reusable, both by students and tutors, and can be returned to later in the programme (see Garrison and Anderson 2003), as a refresher on re-induction to year two, or when faced with a particularly challenging assignment. This approach also allows us to reflect the varied needs and experiences of the student cohort, some members of which are very familiar with or quick to learn certain skills (particularly when linked to ICT), while others require significant support and practice.

The subsequent second year research-related teaching was revised to both dovetail student learning in the first year and to respond to previous student feedback. Entitled 'Research for evidence based practice', a revised module focuses on the research skills needed to explore an issue of practice. As such, specific research methodologies and methods are considered, skills in the critical evaluation and application of research in practice are developed. The module is also designed to prepare the students for the third year dissertation project: a literature-based research project exploring a social work related topic of their choice.

Enhanced Tutor Support

Further development of the research-related social work teaching has sought to ensure clearer and firmer links into the academic tutorial system. On the undergraduate social work programme, students are assigned an academic tutor, with a minimum of three individual tutorials plus two group tutorials during the course of the year. The tutorials are intended to assist and review academic progress. In recent years we have sought to increase attendance at tutorials by making them mandatory, recording whether a student attended a tutorial when offered, and by timetabling 'tutorial weeks' in which space is protected from teaching or placement activities so as to be allotted to tutorials.

As well as ensuring tutorials are taking place, we have also sought to ensure that they are effective in offering the means to support a student's academic development. The role of the tutor in the first year of a student's studies is seen to be particularly important, providing a consistent contact throughout the year. However, the role of the academic tutor is recognised as a challenging one and we therefore sought to provide support in carrying out this role. This has included providing tasks for the students to complete prior to tutorials and, therefore, tools and resources for tutors to use in discussions with students. This is particularly the case in the first term of the first year, so as to support tutors in tracking early progress.

Most notably we have encouraged students to use teachers' feedback on their writing in a much more structured and rigorous way, with the development of a worksheet to be completed for each assignment marked. This worksheet encourages students to engage with assignment feedback to further develop skills in academic writing. The sheet asks the students to identify both what they have done well in an essay (and therefore need to repeat in future assignments) and what they have done less well (and therefore need to improve). The development of this sheet reflects concerns that students find it difficult to translate tutor feedback into concrete ways to improve their writing, with students often only picking up on the aspects that make immediate sense to them (e.g. 'my bibliography/referencing is wrong') rather than the more opaque and challenging aspects, such as how to use evidence to support and structure their own arguments, how to paraphrase effectively, or how to analyse quotes within their writing. The form therefore encourages students to seek explanation regarding any feedback that they do not understand, either from the marker, fellow students, or their tutor.

The development of the form also reflects concerns that tutors are not picking up on repeated errors in successive assignments. The tool is therefore designed to facilitate tutor-tutee dialogue and give structure to supervisions. Its incremental use throughout the first year, and hopefully in later years, also reaffirms the skills that have been developed in this first year module, illustrating that these skills are not just things that need to be demonstrated in order to pass this specific module, but are to be used and developed throughout the degree.

Conclusion

Combining the academic credits necessary for an honours degree with the training requirements of a professional programme, yet remaining within UK higher education's typical three-year undergraduate degree timescale, poses a challenge for both staff and students. However the convergence between academic learning and professional practice is illustrated in the shared language and emphasis within the QAA Benchmark Statement for Social Work (QAA 2008) and the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Social Work (GSCC 2002). In particular, it is made clear that the necessary academic skills outlined by the QAA must be shown to be applied in practice, whilst the practice skills noted in the NOS require skills that can be effectively developed through academic study. As such, skills for successful undergraduate enquiry are also core skills for the development of effective evidence-based social work.

Having recognised the flaws in the early delivery of the new undergraduate programme, a revised curriculum has placed the development of academic research and writing skills at its core. Recent module evaluations suggest that most students have successfully identified and engaged with the key aspects of the revised curriculum, such as critical thinking and reflective practice. They also suggest that students can see the connections between skills for academia and skills for practice, with almost all students rating the teaching as highly useful and relevant to their future career. However, much of the activity described above is in its early phases and requires further evaluation and reflection from both students and staff. We are already conscious that several enhancements could be made. For example, whilst committed to the idea of developing independent learning skills during the first year, we are conscious that such an approach might not allow us to identify those who are struggling or highlight additional support needs, unless the student is proactive in seeking support. We are therefore seeking to develop ways to check student progress and to help students more effectively identify their own learning requirements and available specialist support.

Attempts to address the complex needs of undergraduate social work students – both as academics and future practitioners – therefore remain a ‘work in progress’ for the staff team. This is recognised as not only being the role of the staff delivering particular modules, but as a component of all teaching and a core role of the academic tutor in maintaining a supportive overview in student development.

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