

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

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'.

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.

