The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research
University of Warwick
Ruskin College Research Project

Progress Report, November 2006

KNOWLEDGE FOR CHANGE: SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AS CREATORS OF
KNOWLEDGE

Research questions

"To what extent can student social workers contribute to knowledge that is of
value to people who use social work and social care services and
practitioners providing these services?"

"What teaching and learning supports students in becoming creators of
knowledge?"

Background

This project is located in the Department of Social, Youth and Community
Studies at Ruskin College, Oxford. The Department incorporates the BA (Social
Work) programme, the Foundation Degree in Youth and Community Work and
the Oxfordshire Practice Learning Centre (OPLC), which develops and supports
placements in the voluntary and community sector for student social workers.

The project involves students in the second and third years of the BA (Social
Work) programme. It links with the Research and Social Work module taught in
Term 3 of Year 2, and in particular to the topic 'Carrying out small scale
research'. Students complete an assignment during this module in which they are
required to read a piece of research related to social work and to consider what
were the research questions, methodology and methods, aspects of social justice
addressed or not addressed, strengths and weaknesses of the research and the
main conclusions and implications for social work.

The primary objective of the project is to contribute to the students' appreciation
of research methods, the contestability of 'knowledge', the current debates about
evidence based practice and their understanding of themselves as creators of
knowledge.

Teaching in the Research and Social Work module occurred in tandem with the
process of matching students to placements for their second period of practice
learning, which takes place in the third year of the degree programme. The
Ruskin Social Work programme has a history of working with small voluntary and

community work organisations that provide practice placements to social work students, in addition to statutory agencies.

Project design and methods

The possibility of a student undertaking a small piece of arises in two ways. Firstly, during discussion during the process of matching a social work student to a placement. Alternatively, a research topic can be identified when the student had already begun their placement. Once an area of research has been identified the student will develop research questions, refine the objectives of the project and identify appropriate research methods. Ruskin College tutors are released for 60 hours each for the duration of the project to support and guide students through the stages of their research. We have not been prescriptive about the research methods students might use. However we anticipate that emancipatory and qualitative approaches would be most likely to be adopted by these practitioner researchers (Brown, 2005).

Ruskin College has adopted a Code of Ethics for Research and an Ethical Research Proforma; this project conforms to the Code of Ethics. The Code reflects the mission and values of Ruskin College in relation to empowering ordinary people, promoting their welfare and improving their access to social and economic capital. It embodies the principles of human rights and social justice. In social work and youth and community work this encompasses involving people who use services and their carers in research. This approach is congruent with the General Social Care Council requirement that the BA Social Work should involve people who use services and carers in all aspects of the programme, including selection of students, curriculum design, teaching and assessment.

The research is being carried out, written up and evaluated as part of the student's work-based learning at the placement agency and will be an important component in the Dissertation that they are required to write in the 3rd term of the 3rd year.

Current projects

Students were given information about the Reinvention Centre project as part of the teaching for the Research and Social Work module in the third term of the second year. They were made aware of the principles of the project,the funding available to support their research and that they would be allocated a Research Tutor from within the academic staff team to support their individual pieces of research. They were also made aware of the requirement to disseminate and evaluate their findings both within the Department and to fellow students and academic staff at the University of Warwick.

The process of matching students to practice learning opportunities occurred in tandem with teaching for the Research module. As part of this process, potential

placement providers were made aware of the possibility of students carrying out a research project whilst on placement. This enabled agencies to consider whether they could identify areas of their service which might afford potential for a research project.

The projects

Seven students are currently carrying out or planning to carry out pieces of small scale research within the agencies in which they have been placed. These include both voluntary and statutory agencies; it was envisaged in the research proposal that the focus of the project would primarily be the voluntary and community sector, but a number of statutory agencies have identified research opportunities within their service.

The majority of the research projects were identified by the agencies and the students once they had commenced their period of practice learning. Research questions were formulated and projects designed with support from Research Tutors from within the Ruskin programme in conjunction with agencies.

The current projects are:

- A student is placed with a large social housing association that provides accommodation to a range of service users including people with mental health problems and people with learning difficulties. The housing association is committed to tenant consultation and involvement and student is exploring how the association can more effectively communicate with tenants who have learning difficulties. The outcome of his research will shape future the future practice of the association and may also inform their practice with other service user groups.
- A student is placed in an Oxfordshire County Council supported living scheme for adults with learning difficulties. The scheme provides person centered support to the service users to promote independent living. The student will be exploring an aspect of service delivery; there is an opportunity for co-operation and shared learning with the previous project.
- A student is placed in a team working with unaccompanied asylum seeking children located within the Adult and Community Services Department of Oxfordshire County Council. She will be researching the role of the County Council as a corporate parent to such children and how this responsibility is carried out.
- A student is placed with the service for young people, Connexions. She is working with a project for very young mothers which aims to provide them with education, training and employment opportunities. She will be researching the effectiveness of this service in relation to the young women's own perception of their needs.
- A student is placed in the Street Sleepers Team in Oxford. This project is funded by the Crime Reduction Initiative financially supported by the

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Its aim is to reduce the numbers of people sleeping on the streets through resettlement into accommodation. It offers a range of support, including welfare benefits advice, accessing health services and finding housing. She will be researching the effectiveness of services for people leaving prison.

The following students have indicated that they intend to carry out research in their respective settings but have not yet identified their research questions:

- A student placed in a mental health team based in a hospital in Oxford working with people with enduring mental health difficulties
- A student based in the social work department in a general hospital in Swindon

Future activity

On 30th January students will participate in a College-based review of their work. This will be an opportunity for students to present and share their work in progress to their peers and to involve agencies and the people who use their services in an ongoing review and discussion of the projects. It is envisaged that presentations would encompass consideration of the design, execution and preliminary findings of the research and would support student learning in relation to research methods, any ethical issues or dilemmas identified and to reinforce their understandings from the Research and Social Work module. It is anticipated that both students, tutors, practitioners and people who use the services will benefit from being engaged in a process of active dialogue and mutual learning.

In May 2007 a further College-based event will provide an opportunity to disseminate their research findings to the whole Year 3 BA (Social Work) cohort and, if appropriate, to students from the Foundation Degree in Youth and Community Work. It is envisaged that the project could inform the development of the Foundation Degree into a three year BA programme and provide a model for a part of the curriculum.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the project will be carried out by Teresa Smith and a colleague for the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Oxford. The evaluation will seek to understand how involvement in the project has enabled the students to contribute to the creation of knowledge of value to practitioners and people who use social work and social care services, and how the project has impacted on their understanding of how they learn through being researchers. It will be carried out through interviews with students, practitioners, service users and Research Tutors.

Conclusion

The project has generated interest from within the year 3 cohort of the BA programme; seven students are currently actively involved in developing research. Preliminary feedback from Research Tutors indicates that students are engaged in refining their research questions, considering research methods and designing their projects. This process contributes both to student's understanding of role and value of research in their placement setting and of their understanding of social work services and their impact on the people who receive them. It is of interest, and encouraging, that practitioners in statutory agencies have also been able to identify unmet need for research and knowledge and have engaged with the project. This development should strengthen partnerships between the programme and placement providers, helping to embed the project for future cohorts. The College- based event on 30th January will provide an opportunity for students to share their work with their peers, tutors and other agencies, and a time to take stock and reflect on the process before moving on to the next stage of completion, evaluation and dissemination.

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