

Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education: An introduction for those new to higher education



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What is this introduction booklet and who is it for?

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) has produced a guide called *Resource guide 3: Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education*.

Resource guide 3 is for all people involved in teaching the new social work degree, as well as students who are learning the social work profession.

Service users and carers are often involved in planning and delivering the social work degree programme but they may be new to the way higher education works. There are words that are also specific to higher education.

This booklet is an introduction to some of these academic words and particular ways of working. It has been written to be used alongside SCIE Resource guide 3, and not on its own.

What is in this booklet?

This booklet is both an introduction to and a summary of Resource guide 3.

The key messages of Resource guide 3 are called 'signposts to new ways of working' (page 4). For each of these key messages there are findings from books, research and practice. This information is to encourage discussion among students and teachers. A summary of each key message is given in this booklet (page 5).

The service user and carer report on what makes good communication that was in Resource guide 3 is reproduced in this booklet in full (page 4) as it is an essential part of good communication.

A section of learning tips has been included (page 6), some of which are provided by the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP). The learning tips suggest how to use practice examples and how to find references.

The appendix to this booklet contains:

- a summary of the methodology (page 11), which explains how Resource guide 3 was created
- a summary of related documents (page 10) (the knowledge and research reviews related to Resource guide 3)
- a word list of phrases which may occur in the resource guide (page 11), knowledge review, and research review on this topic. In this sense, this booklet can also be useful for readers of these other publications who may be new to social work or higher education.

What is Resource guide 3 about?

Resource guide 3 is about teaching and learning communication skills in social work qualifying courses that would allow people to become social workers, for example with regard to the new social work degree.

Why is Resource guide 3 important?

Learning to communicate in a professional manner in a variety of situations with people from different backgrounds can be difficult. For social workers, communication is so important that it would be difficult for them to do their job well, or even at all, without good communication skills.

Communication can take place in difficult and challenging situations. Consider:

- having to reach out to someone who avoids all contact with social services and care agencies
- having to tell someone that you are concerned about their actions as a parent
- telling a carer that their son is having a mental health crisis and urgently needs to go to hospital.

These situations require very good but different communication skills.

Communicating with people that have different communication needs to yourself can also be difficult, for example, if you do not speak the same language or know enough about how they communicate.

Qualified or student social workers who are communicating with service users, carers or other professionals, or students carrying out role play in front of other students and teachers, can feel very uncomfortable, and people are often shy to come forward and practice these skills.

Resource guide 3 aims to encourage educators to think about how they teach communication skills and how to use different ideas to teach these important skills.

Who is Resource guide 3 for?

Resource guide 3 is intended to be used by all those involved in teaching and learning on the new social work degree.

Resource guide 3 is for:

- programme providers of the social work degree such as universities and higher education institutions (HEIs)
- practice assessors as agency-based educators, that is, people who offer support to students learning in the workplace
- service users and carers involved in the planning and delivery of the social work degree programme.

Resource guide 3 may also be of interest to:

- employers, especially those offering practice learning opportunities
- practice learning organisers
- student social workers

- other people involved in developing people's skills in the workforce, for example, training officers.

How can Resource guide 3 help with teaching and learning communication skills?

Looking at past experiences

The information from books and practice examples which have been included in Resource guide 3 have come from social work courses that existed before the new social work degree. Looking at the information, knowledge and experience from the past might be useful for people involved in the new course.

Focusing on general communication

Communicating with adults, children and people with specific communication needs is a very broad area, so Resource guide 3 only looks at communication and teaching and learning communication generally. It also looks at how to assess a person's communication skills.

A starting point for future information

Resource guide 3 was published to come out at the same time as the start of the first new degree programmes. It is one of the first resources for the new programme. Resource guide 3 will be developed further as the degree programme progresses. SCIE will also look at how people are using the guide and whether changes need to be made.

This introductory booklet and Resource guide 3 are a starting point for ongoing work on communication. SCIE will continue to support the sharing and recording of work that takes place as the degree programmes progress.

How does Resource guide 3 work?

The information in Resource guide 3:

- looks at ways of teaching and learning communication skills in social work training up to qualifying level
- describes the range of research that is used in teaching communication skills and reviews this research explaining how it was done, and what was good or bad about the research
- looks at how communication skills were taught in social work education before the new degree was introduced
- acts as a starting point for further research that people might want to do
- creates chances for people involved in and interested in communication in social work education to say what they think about what is taught in the degree programme
- gives links to other useful information and resources.

What is not covered in Resource guide 3?

The guide does not cover:

- specific or technical communications
- communication skills in specific situations, including where there are cultural or language differences (this may be something SCIE does in the future)
- information and research from nursing, medicine and other related professions (this may also be something SCIE does in the future).

How do you use Resource guide 3?

The information in Resource guide 3 is mostly things that were learned from the research review and practice review SCIE conducted. The information is presented in different ways to help you to decide how much information you need at any one time.

There are references to additional information such as books to read on the same topic or how to get more information. There are also references to examples that can be found elsewhere in Resource guide 3 and from other publications and websites.

There is an electronic version of Resource guide 3 with links to other websites. This guide can be downloaded from www.scie.org.uk/publications

If you are new to social work or higher education, SCIE suggests that you start with this booklet before approaching Resource guide 3.

What is in Resource guide 3?

The following sections are in Resource guide 3:

- An introduction to the resource guide
- Signposts to new ways of working (these are the key themes with a summary of each theme provided to encourage discussion).
- Changes in social work training (this section explains the background behind the new social work degree, contains a summary introduction and explains what the main purpose of the new social work degree is).
- Key messages from service users and carers
- Full summary: the SCIE research review *Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education*
- Full summary: the SCIE practice review *Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education*
- Practice examples (the practice examples are ways that communication is currently being taught in different places. There are 14 different examples described and reviewed in Resource guide 3).
- References and source material (books, research and resources used to make Resource guide 3).
- Appendix A: explaining how the research guide was made

- Appendix B: full text: the SCIE practice review *Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education*.

Key messages from Resource guide 3: signposts to new ways of working.

A summary of points made in Resource guide 3:

Learning aims and outcomes

The SCIE practice review found that people were unsure about how and where to teach and learn communication skills, for example:

- in an academic setting such as a university
- in a practice setting such as in a social services team
- through theory such as books and research
- or through experience, for example, talking, practising and role play.

Standards

There needs to be clear standards that state what level of communication skills are required by students and practitioners.

Assessing communication skills

There needs to be more thinking on how communication skills are assessed, for example, who should be saying what is good communication? Practitioners, assessors, educators, service users and carers? And how do we check if someone is good at communicating or not?

Evaluating of teaching and learning communicating skills

Often, when people are looking at whatever teaching and learning has been successful, they look at how well things were taught. But we should also look at whether people's individual or group learning aims were met and what they achieved from the experience.

Service user and carer involvement

Service users and carers should be involved in communications training for social work education.

The relationship between practice and academic settings, including quality assurance and the place of learning and the workplace

Teaching, learning and assessing of communication skills should take place both in an academic setting, for example, in a university and in a practice placement, for example, in a social work department.

Written information about how things are taught

There is not a lot of written information about how to teach and learn communication skills, but there are different ways of teaching and learning being practised that are not written down. Teachers should share the ways they practice communication training.

Writing skills

It should be clear what level of writing skill is needed for students and social workers.

Transferability across practice settings and from training to doing

Students need to be able to take what they have learnt in practice and apply it to different real situations.

Learning from, about, and with other professionals

Students need to learn to communicate with other professionals verbally and in writing.

Key messages: service user and carer involvement.

Involving service users and carers in the new social work degree is required by the government. Students can learn a lot from the experiences of the people they will be working with. Resource guide 3 contains a list of characteristics that made good communicators. These characteristics were chosen by service users and carers.

Social workers who are good at communication:

- are courteous
- turn up on time for appointments
- speak directly to service users, not carers or personal assistants
- don't use jargon
- 'open their ears' and 'think before they talk'
- listen and 'really hear' and accept what carers are saying
- explain what is happening and why
- do what they say they are going to do and don't over-promise
- say honestly when they can't help
- are patient and make enough time to communicate with disabled service users
- recognise the loss of dignity people experience when approaching social services for the first time and respond sensitively
- don't assume anything about a service user's abilities simply because of a disability
- understand the importance of privacy, peace and quiet and service users' and carers' choice of meeting place
- know that closed questions can be easier for service users with communication difficulties to answer
- check that they've been understood
- find a way of communicating that works
- remember that young people may prefer to talk while doing something else
- build trust, empathy and warmth
- work in organisations that help them to do all these things.

Learning tips: practice examples.

The practice examples are examples of ways that communicating with service users and carers is currently being taught in different places. There are 14 different examples described and reviewed in Resource guide 3.

The examples in Resource guide 3 were chosen for different reasons:

- what is thought to be 'good practice'
- whether service users and carers were involved or whether they participated
- the involvement of other people who might have an interest in results of the communication training, for example, academics
- whether the example is acceptable with modern social work and education standards
- whether the examples can be done in everyday practice
- and whether it would be easy to keep up this practice over time and in different situations.

There are comments on the above criteria for each practice example.

None of the examples in Resource guide 3 have been reviewed particularly for how well they teach communication skills. An example listed here is not necessarily better than another.

Educators should use practice examples as a starting point, thinking about how to use the example for their students. They should think about:

- how it would work with the resources given for example, students, teachers, books and equipment
- how the example would work locally – are there any reasons a practice example might need to be changed so it better suits the people on the course and the people they will be working with?
- the size of the group working on this example, and the type of people working on it, for example, their experience.

Some of the practice examples are based around books, others are exercises, programmes and role play exercises. For this reason, each example will require different preparation to make it effective.

How to use references and sources.

There are a number of references in Resource guide 3. The next section of this booklet explains of how to access the information in these references. This information has been reproduced with the permission of SWAP.

There are six main types of literature that are normally available in published in print format (rather than electronic):

- books
- journals
- theses and dissertations
- conference proceedings
- research reports
- government publications.

This booklet looks at the main reference types in Resource guide 3: books, journals, theses and research reports.

Books

Research studies are not usually written as books. Books generally take a long time to write and to get published, so even if one seemed relevant it is probably not up to date. Recent textbooks may provide you with helpful lists of basic references.

Journals

These are probably the most helpful resource and you should be aware of the main journals in your field. There are two main sorts of journal: academic and professional. It is in the academic journals that you are most likely to find papers on research projects. Professional journals are very useful for getting a feel for what are live issues, but they often contain articles which reflect a point of view rather than research conducted according to acknowledged methods and principles. A paper published in a journal that comes out quarterly refers to research conducted at least two years previously.

The social work journals include:

- *Journal of Social Service Research*
- *British Journal of Social Work*
- *European Journal of Social Work*
- *International Social Work*
- *Research on Social Work Practice*
- *Journal of Health & Social Policy.*

On the journal websites you can find indexes and abstracts for articles in each edition. Full copies of articles can be purchased (but this can be expensive) so it is better to find a library that subscribes to the journal either in print or electronic form.

Theses and dissertations

They can be lengthy and not that user-friendly as they are written to meet a specific set of academic requirements. Such material is also sometimes difficult to access because it is not usually on open library shelves, but in archives. A recent one may provide a good bibliographic source, so it might be worth looking at the reference list rather than working through the whole document page by page – or just read the conclusions chapter. Some institutions will only keep such material for a time-limited period, for example five years, before it is destroyed.

Research reports

Many organisations publish research reports and these often appear soon after the research has been completed. You usually find out about these from research handbooks and conference proceedings and websites like SCIE's (www.scie.org.uk) and Research in Practice (RiP) (www.rip.org.uk), although these often do not provide information on

smaller studies or those that have not been peer reviewed. Not all studies reach a peer reviewed stage but this is no reflection on their validity.

Internet searching skills

Finding research information on the internet or 'online' is about having the skills to search in the areas that are relevant for you and the knowledge about what is out there.

SCIE's web-based resource Social Care Online has an online tutorial to introduce social workers and social care workers to the internet and searching skills:

www.scie-socialcareonline.org.uk/tutorials.asp

There is also a tutorial that introduces social research methods.

Appendix: Other related documents

A summary of SCIE research review Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education

There is not enough written information about the way communication skills are taught and learnt. There is also not enough written information that backs up the way these skills are taught.

There needs to be more focus on the following areas:

- books, research and information on involving service user and service user points of view in the learning and teaching of communication skills
- communication with people from different cultures
- helping practitioners working in social care to contribute to teaching and learning in all areas of practice, especially where there is not a lot of research in an area
- the teaching and learning of specific communication skills
- specific definitions of commonly used words such as generalist, specialist and advanced practice skills, micro skills and macro skills, interventions and so on
- the way things are taught and not just what is being taught
- how to transfer what is learnt in an educational setting to the reality of the job
- using face-to-face teaching along with computer-based programs and skills laboratories and not using computers as the only way of teaching communication skills
- a way of working that is reliable and has a set way of saying how to tell if communication with service users has been successful.

A summary of SCIE practice review Teaching and learning in social work: Communication

The practice review looks at communication skills for working with children and adults but not those with specific communication needs.

The practice review looks at ways of teaching and learning communication skills in social work. It looks at this from the point of view of all those interested in communication in social work. These stakeholders include academics, practice assessors, students, service users (including adults and children) and carers.

The review looked at:

- how communication skills are currently taught and how this training happens
- how to tell the difference between what is a core skill that can be used in a number of different situations and a specific or technical skill
- the range of training needed to perform all the duties and tasks for beginning practice and for qualifying level
- how to identify the most important aspects (principles and values) of communication for all categories of social work.

How was Resource guide 3 created? A summary of the methodology.

Deciding what would be covered

The first step was to talk to academics, practice assessors, social work students, front-line social care managers, service users and newly qualified social workers to work out what the resource guide would cover.

SCIE research review

SCIE produced a research review, that is, an evaluation of the existing research and information on the subject. The review particularly looked at:

- the theory (written information) behind the teaching and learning of communication
- how communication skills are taught and how effective this teaching is.

SCIE practice review

SCIE produced a practice review that looked at the way communication skills are taught. The practice review was carried out using a number of different methods, such as surveys, focus groups, and small case studies. It looked at things from different points of view such as those of service users, teachers, assessors, and other people interested in the way communication is taught and learned.

Word list	
Agency-based educators	In an organisation where students are learning in the workplace, an agency-based educator is someone who is qualified to support and teach these students. Agency-based educators can also be called practice assessors.
Assess/assessing	Checking and reviewing the level of skills a person has in a particular area. The word 'evaluate' can also be used.
Assessment	The process where, or the way in which, a person's skills in a particular area are checked and reviewed. The word 'evaluation' can also be used.
Case study	A written description looking at a particular event or situation, describing what happened as objectively as possible.
Curriculum	The programme and topics that are taught as part of a course or degree.
Evaluate/evaluating	Checking and reviewing the level of skills a person has in a particular area. The word 'assess' can also be used.
Evaluation	The process where, or the way in which, a person's skills in a particular area are checked and reviewed. The word 'assessment' can also be used.
Higher education institution	A place where further learning (after compulsory schooling) takes place, such as a university or college.
Knowledge reviews	Term used by SCIE. A knowledge review is an evaluation of the existing research and information about a particular area of social care, including a review of how things are currently done and a summary of what works well. Knowledge reviews also say which areas need more research.

Learning outcomes	An agreement of what a person should learn from taking part in a section of, or all of, a course or degree.
Methodology	A word used to describe the way(s) research is carried out.
Practice	Things done in reality, for example in a work setting.
Practice agency	An organisation that takes on students to allow them to learn in the workplace.
Practice assessors	A person in a practice agency who supports and teaches students to learn in the workplace.
Practice guides	A phrase used by SCIE. Practice guides are a free resource found on SCIE's website (www.scie.org.uk) that have information, research and current good practice about particular areas of social care. Practice guides give users the chance to learn more about what works well and use these ideas in their own work.
Practice learning	Learning in the workplace rather than in a university or college.
Qualifying level	The minimum level of education needed for someone to do a particular job.
Quality assurance	Checking that a course, book or service is of a good enough standard to use. There is usually a set way that something goes through quality assurance or becomes quality assured.
Research review	A phrase used by SCIE. A research review is a review of the research that exists in a particular area of social care.
Resource	In this instance, a book, guide, or collection of information that can be used for learning and teaching.
Resource guides	A phrase used by SCIE. Resource guides list and describe information about a particular area of social care, especially where there is a lot of information and it is hard to know what information to use, or where there is a new area of social care that people need to know about.
Role play	Dramatised activity where people take on various characters to think about how to react or handle different situations.
Social work degree	A new university degree for people wanting to become social workers.
Stakeholders	People who have a particular interest in something because they are affected by it. For example, service users are stakeholders in the new social work degree because the results of the degree will affect the services they get in the future.
Standards	A term used to describe the level or quality of something, for example, the standard of training provided by an organisation.
Theory	Written information such as research, examples, case studies.
Transferability	How much a skill, information or way of working can be used or be done in a different setting. For example, whether a way of working learnt in universities can be done by people in a real social work setting.
Web-based	Refers to information that can be found on the internet.

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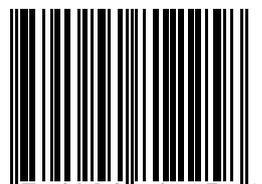
The full Resource guide is published by
SCIE. It is available in print from SCIE and
on our website. All of SCIE's publications
and resources are free.

This publication is available in an
alternative format upon request.

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