

Summary

Knowledge review 1: Learning and teaching assessment skills in social work education

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Although assessment has been recognised as a core skill in social work and should underpin social work interventions, there is no singular theory or understanding as to what the purpose of assessment is and what the process should entail. Social work involvement in the assessment process may include establishing need or eligibility for services, to seek evidence of past events or to determine likelihood of future danger, it may underpin recommendations to other agencies, or may determine the suitability of other service providers. In some settings assessment is considered to begin from the first point of contact and may be a relatively short process, whereas elsewhere it may be a process involving several client contacts over an extended period of time. These variations permeate the literature on the teaching of assessment in social work and cognate disciplines.

The learning and teaching of assessment in qualifying social work programmes tends to be embedded into the curriculum and clustered with other learning objectives rather than be taught as a distinct module. As such, it can be difficult to delineate teaching about assessment from other aspects of the curriculum. A lack of explicitness as to how teaching relates to learning about assessment has the potential to lead to students considering they have learnt little about assessment. The embedding of assessment into the curriculum in qualifying programmes is in contrast to the numerous published accounts of teaching courses on specific methods of assessment to qualified workers.

Several different approaches to the teaching of assessment are proposed in the literature. Case-based teaching is frequently proposed although this can take a range of forms. These include presentations of case studies (based on real cases or fictional accounts in film and literature) by academics, agency staff or students, which may be supplemented by feedback from stakeholders including service users and service user organisations. Interviews may be conducted with, and feedback received from, actors who have been trained to play 'standardised clients'. A further case-based approach involves the observation of children and families. Didactic lecturing and various uses of video equipment and computers have also been proposed.

Learning by doing has long been one of the hallmarks of social work education, and supervised practice learning in agency settings gives students an opportunity to further develop assessment skills learnt in the classroom. While classroom-based learning includes learning component parts of the assessment process such as active listening and questioning, which are sometimes taught in skills laboratories, there are also a number of models of university-based

practice learning in assessment which tend to involve students producing assessments under the supervision of university staff.

There is a substantial amount of published literature concerned with the teaching of particular frameworks or tools for assessment. Most of this relates to training programmes for qualified workers and much of it is agency based. However, at the qualifying level there is some debate as to whether the teaching of frameworks and tools provides guidance or inhibits the development of transferable assessment skills.

Assessments do not happen in a vacuum and the ability to conduct assessments requires not just knowledge about the assessment process, but also the ability to draw on a broader repertoire of social work skills and social science knowledge. This includes knowledge about particular client groups and social problems, and skills pertaining to research, critical thinking and interviewing, as well as cultural sensitivity. Hence, the effectiveness of teaching about assessment may be curtailed if students have insufficient opportunities to acquire the additional skills and knowledge required in order to make appropriate assessments.

The relationship between what is taught in the classroom and assessment practice in social work agencies also needs careful consideration. While educators may argue that their role is to teach the principles of assessment, employers may want to employ social workers who are familiar with the assessment tools and frameworks currently used by their agency. For example, to what extent should assessment methods which involve a considerable amount of time in collecting and analysing information be taught if practitioners are often required to make assessments in short periods of time?

Such questions demand consideration given that social workers seem to discard training on assessment that is not easily applied to their current practice. It is also crucial that social workers are able to think critically about the assessment tools they do utilise.

Several of the published innovations in teaching of assessment involved very small numbers of students and required significant resources of staff time and/ or equipment. We doubt that many social work programmes in the United Kingdom, especially those with substantial numbers of students, would currently have either the staff or financial resources to implement some of these. Furthermore, the available documentation of teaching often includes little or no information about evaluation beyond expressions of satisfaction by either students and/or their teachers. Indeed it was relatively rare to find published accounts concerned with teaching of assessment that involved some degree of rigorous evaluation of impacts or outcomes, with only 11 out of the 60 papers reviewed including this information.

The existing lack of evaluation data that goes beyond ratings of satisfaction makes it difficult for us to recommend one or more approaches as best practice in relation to teaching of assessment. However, the following points may guide the development of good practice in this aspect of the social work curriculum:

- **Principles of assessment:** social work programmes need to ensure that graduating social workers have an understanding of the principles of assessment. While particular

frameworks and assessment tools may be used in teaching as exemplars, teaching which focuses primarily on the administration of these runs the risk of producing social workers whose assessment skills are not transferable to other settings and client groups.

- **Embedded curriculum:** even if the teaching of assessment is embedded into the curriculum rather than taught as a separate component of qualifying social work programmes, programme providers should be able to articulate how learning objectives in relation to assessment skills are to be achieved.
- **Practice learning:** students need opportunities to apply theoretical learning on assessment. This can occur in both university-based practice learning and in supervised practice learning.
- **Working in partnership:** social work programme providers should work in partnership with other key stakeholders, including employers and service user organisations, to ensure that students gain access to a range of perspectives around the assessment process.
- **Knowledge and skills base:** social work programmes need to ensure that graduates not only have knowledge of the assessment process but are able to draw on a broader repertoire of social work skills and social science knowledge when undertaking assessments.

Notes

This review was commissioned by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) in collaboration with the Social Policy and Social Work Learning and Teaching Support Network (SWAPltsn) as part of a programme of work to support the implementation of the new social work degree. Copies of the full review are available from SCIE (publications@scie.org.uk) or on SCIE's website (www.scie.org.uk). The review will form the basis of a resource guide for social work educators, to be made available at the end of 2003.

Other work in the programme includes how agencies can support the learning of newly qualified social workers, the role of practice teachers, and the development of a web-based resource on research literacy. A review of research utilisation will also address qualified social workers as part of the wider social care workforce.

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Further reviews in this programme cover the learning and teaching of communication skills, law, partnership working, inter-professional education, and human growth and behaviour.