

The practice educator lens: bringing student practice into focus using the direct observation

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Title

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Abstract

This paper is based on the presentation given at the 11th International Conference in Belfast (April 2016). The article explores the experience of the direct observation from the practice educator perspective with students undertaking practice placements as part of the pre-qualifying programmes for Social Work within England. It seeks to explore some of the issues present within the direct observation as a tool 'for' and 'of' assessment and how fundamental it can be to ascertain competence within a real experience for students working with service users. It raises the question of what is a 'good enough' direct observation from a service user perspective and how this informs the recommendation of a pass of the practice placement. It proposes that there are some latent challenges in setting a benchmark within the direct observation however doing so would allow a clearer focus on the assessment process.

Introduction

In changing the framework for the assessment of the practice learning placement both within the first and second (final) placements of social work education in England, little attention has been paid to the importance and role of the direct observation. I am drawing on my own perspective and experience as an off-site practice educator over the last six years with students from a range of Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) on their first (70 days) and final practice placement placements (100 days) placements on the BA in Social Work (BASW) and the Masters in Social Work (MSW) programmes. My experience as an off-site practice educator has been situated in a range of placements within the voluntary sector.

In this paper I look at the congruence of opinion between the student and practice educator and how the direct observation brings these two views together. I seek to show the relevance of the direct observation as a tool within the assessment process through examining the concept of what constitutes 'good enough' practice. In considering this terminology, I highlight how recommending a pass or fail is not currently used and how the selection of types of situations for the direct observation is central and could be outlined in a more prescriptive manner. I also examine the challenges of the timeline of the placement and propose a gradient type of criteria to be applied in order to address how as the placement progresses, how the expectations of practice also become higher.

In part this reflective account derives from a direct experience of failing a student on a final practice placement and the challenge of this decision which was confirmed by the experiences of assessing this student's direct observations. It is of note that (Finch and Taylor, 2013) have commented on the challenges of failing a student for practice educators. From my own perspective this experience has confirmed the subjectivity of the direct observation assessment (Cowburn et al, 2000) and also how vulnerable individuals (service users) may perceive the process. This may inhibit how service users being able to give a corresponding assessment of it and their understanding of the assessment criteria.

Service user feedback within social work education per se is of significant value (Department of Health, 2002; Taylor and LeRiche, 2006). Service user feedback within a practice placement is valuable and stressed as a useful tool (Edwards 2003) but is not without its challenges in supporting the evidence for the assessment. In my experience of working within the field of offending and addiction, conducting a direct observation with someone in 'active' addiction is in itself problematic.

Within active addiction to substances such as amphetamines and opiates the lasting impact of these behaviours on cognitive impairment and decision making (Ornstein et al 2000, Davis et al 2002, Rodgers and Robbins 2001) could affect a service user's ability to provide the decisional balance required in giving feedback on a student's practice within a direct observation. Alongside this consideration, it may also be questionable to ask

service users to comment if they are not involved with actual outcome of the assessment (Kemp 2010).

Service user feedback cannot solely be relied upon as a benchmark of good enough practice as there are significant implications for service users in complaining or criticising students practice when they are themselves under scrutiny and statutory requirements. In particular this may be very pertinent to those service users who are at risk of court proceedings. This may in fact lend service users to be more empathetic to students practice rather than critical, and the converse may also be true (Shennan, 1998). Wilson (1995) discussed how service user's feedback is often linked to their prior experiences of social workers and services rather than the present encounter which is of course why the direct observation as a real experience is of such importance.

Context

The reforms outlined in the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) have gone some way to address the requirements for change needed within social work education within England. However with the demise of the College of Social Work and a lack of clarity from stakeholders of what the future may bring, there may be further implications ahead for qualifying programmes in Social Work in England. With the changes to the statutory child protection sector in the making (Butler, 2014; Pidd 2016) and the mooted move from the HCPC registration body towards an educative framework (Stevenson, 2016), it is a time of uncertainty for both social work education and within the first year as a newly qualified social worker in practice.

In this state of flux, the new PCF framework has tried to reinvent the core requirements for social workers which have been incorporated within the assessment of the core component of social work education, the practice placement. The PCF domains have tried to address the assessment requirements for social workers in a more holistic way and placed a greater emphasis on the recommendations of the practice educator (Plenty & Gower, 2013) and with the introduction of Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) for practice educators sought to upgrade their status. The PCF nine domains are established as the blueprint of capability; professionalism, values and ethics, diversity, rights and responsibilities, knowledge, critical reflection, intervention and skills and professional leadership (TCSW 2012a)

The difficulty remains as to how the change of framework has enabled progress when the tools for assessment, such as the direct observation have stayed the same. In principle through getting rid of the tick box 'unit' criteria under the National Occupational Standards (NOS) and looking at desired qualities, skills and knowledge for social workers which are defined by the Standards of Proficiency (SOP's), this has enabled a more rounded and integrated approach to structuring what social workers need to know,

need to possess and demonstrate in order to qualify. My query within this paper remains that the core components of how to test these out have not been reworked in light of these changes which comes from a consideration of the direct observation from the 'modernist perspective of seeking to measure attainable outcomes' (Taylor and Bogo 2014)

HEI's are free to interpret the academic blueprint of the academic mark which accompanies the practice learning modules rather than using the previous practice portfolio under the NOS. I have found through the experience of the transition from the NOS to the PCF framework that the new requirements do require practice educators to be more creative in how they address the capabilities and in evidencing their assessment decisions and therefore further exploration of the direct observation template would be essential.

Congruence of an assessment

The direct observation of practice as a tool for learning and evidence of competence in practice is widely used within many health and social care professions, however its use is variable and discipline related. Clinical expertise within certain professions is tested out with real patients under watchful eyes of supervisors and clinicians, some professions make use of simulations and mentoring is a vital component of this (Alinier et al 2004, Bogo and McKnight 2006, Moulding et al 2016). The observing of practice or clinical expertise is a component of many skills based professions (Cahill 1996) alongside the positioning of clinical guides in situ in the practice placement setting (Andrews and Roberts 2003).

The direct observation within the social work practice placement context is a mechanism of convergence of opinion into reality, by this I mean where the practice educator's opinion and judgement of practice becomes a reality. It is also the point of contact between the student and the practice educator where perception and performance meet reality.

The student's view of their own practice either concurs with the practice educators or a mismatch occurs between how good the student perceives they are, and how good they really are in face to face assessment and engagement of vulnerable people. In relation to how 'good' they think they are, we are looking for good practice, ascertaining the prospects for good practitioners. I would go further and suggest that the profession needs excellent practitioners and not just 'good enough' ones.

When a mismatch occurs between the practice educator's view and the student's perception, which occurs rarely in my own experience, there are ensuing relationship challenges between the student and the practice

educator. Views become known from both sides through the reflective session conducted afterwards and the written feedback.

Ethnographic realities (Draper 2015) can influence social workers, the milieu in which we are operating including the emerging critique of the profession (Franklin and Parton 2014) and the anxiety in managing the decision making of intervention versus self-determination, such as the risks we can tolerate professionally and what we can attribute to conscious risk taking. This will of course be influenced by my own ability to tolerate higher levels of risk from working within offending and addictions, where higher risks are managed such as violence, injecting and overdose and notwithstanding, life threatening events. This will impact on my practice educator lens and the expectations of an implied assumption that students will need to tolerate high risk levels when out in practice. This could be construed as an ethical dilemma in allowing a student during a direct observation to test out their skills or rescuing them out of it (Humphrey 2007)

As an experienced practice educator and social work practitioner it is difficult to measure what you expect to see in a direct observation from an experienced viewpoint. I cannot turn the clock back on what I have learnt about the service user group, successful or otherwise interventions and governance of the profession. I have an experienced set of eyes on the 'real time' moment with the student and the service user. That is why I am a practice educator; it is for these eyes that I am a prerequisite of the assessment process. I can only imagine what the service user really thinks of the student's skills and can only predict what the consequences of misguided intentions can have on a service user life. Here lies the subjectivity however what I do know is the damage that ill-informed practice can have on service user outcomes (Ofsted, 2013).

At the point of the direct observation, the practice educator has to juggle roles, the mentor role with the assessor role (Doel, 2008) and supervisor role. They are required to make a judgement call on how to reconcile these at any one given moment for and with the student. I recall one direct observation vividly where I felt as if the risks posed by the service user to themselves were great and not addressed by the student sufficiently and therefore after the direct observation sought extra support from the wider team and team manager, a common outcome echoed by Humphrey (2007). This student passed their placement. Another recountable observation was when I felt the possible consequences of being complicit in a home visit with inappropriate service user behaviour remaining unchecked by the student, the prosecution during the Wintercomfort case (Shapiro, 2000) and the anxiety of condoning drug using behaviour in the back of my mind. This student passed. One service user adamantly refused to let me observe the meeting with the student as he said that I was part of the establishment. At that moment, I was not sure what the student was offering if the student was perceived as not part of the establishment, this raised issues of confidentiality and boundary setting. This student passed.

How as a practice educator could we iron out subjectivity (Cowburn et al, 2000; Le Riche and Tanner, 1998)? I would propose that it is through assessing skills differently to values, assessing knowledge separate to skills. I would maintain that the direct observation is the intersection of all of these. A real time conversation in a real time moment in a service user's life. My experience that I draw from here is within the direct observations where service users are vulnerable, in desperate circumstances, leading at times very volatile and dangerous lives. And therefore what happens in the real moment may have serious consequences for setting up future engagement with those service users. This engagement experience can also set up future behavioural patterns for service users when approaching professionals such as displacement of anger, frustration and hopelessness of yet another social work encounter and foster future disillusionment with service provision. Whatever we try to achieve as social workers in practice we are aiming to be memorable in the moment as the relationship based view of social work practice would suggest (Ruch et al, 2010; Trevithick 2003). Without the relationship to mediate through, the intervention of itself is meaningless (Howe, 1998).

Good enough direct observation

As social workers we are familiar with the concepts of 'good enough parenting' and its derivation (Winnicott, 1953) and the implications of what the factors for consideration are alongside the thresholds for intervention and safeguarding. The phrase good enough has been utilised within parenting assessments and whilst an interesting and useful concept is constructed within a wider appreciation of causal factors and evidence base practice within safeguarding. There is some question as to whether what we are looking for in newly qualified social workers is good enough practice; I would argue that good enough is far from what we are looking for in the current climate of social work and a profession under such scrutiny (McNicoll, 2016).

However in thinking about being good enough as a concept in practice and applying this term to the direct observation, and to the practice educator's assessment as a whole, I am worried by it. In thinking this through, I have been struck by what the concept of passing really is and how it can be defined within the direct observation, and alongside this what the issues are if a student's practice is merely good enough. Good enough by whose standards (LaFrance & Herbert, 2004; Skinner and Whyte, 2004); the practice educator, the service user or the agency in which the student is placed.

As the decision to pass would essentially be the practice educators, in consultation with the on-site supervisor, if there is one, and the agency. This decision is not derived from purely one view however gathering evidence to support the view is the practice educator's responsibility.

Subjectivity as such cannot be ignored however from the value base of social work (Thompson, 2000; Dominelli 2009) derived from these viewpoints maintaining integrity of the profession is relevant (Le Riche and Tanner, 1998). Often when students fail the moral standpoint and upholding of the integrity of the profession is cited as the rationale behind the decision (Finch and Taylor, 2013).

Whilst we have the PCF framework, there is the additional angle of service user impact which has not been explored within this framework or the detriment to service user's experiences of social workers and social work services. If we consider that as a service user we are experiencing a 'good enough' interaction, it is worth considering just how inadequate this would actually feel like. To consider a comparison from another health care context, as a patient seeing a GP would we like the appointment with the GP to be 'good enough', of course not, we would not go back to see them again. It may in fact put us off visiting the surgery at all. We would want the experience with the GP to be positive and helpful, in some way productive and purposeful. There is a baseline. If we pass students whose practice is good enough, this could ultimately be a negative experience for the service user as they would want to feel it was a positive interaction. Therefore within direct observations, the concept of positive is much higher than meeting minimum or good enough criteria. I think therefore that the direct observation does need to be perceived in a slightly different way with clearer guidelines of how a decision is being made with a clear pass or fail recommendation made.

As an example, the PCF assessment completed by the practice educator is purely a pass or a fail. At what point is a direct observation a fail, and at what level does the student's practice constitutes a pass? To apply academic criteria on the BASW this could be 40% in an achievement and 50% on the MSW however in real terms if I felt an interaction with another person in social work terms was 40% or 50% in quality, as a pass or good enough, this really would not be enough in quality or experience.

Also I have never seen practice educators using the direct observation with an explicit pass or fail recommendation attached to it. However in my experience of working with a student who failed the final practice placement, the direct observation was instrumental in the evidence of a fail and needed to be recorded as such. Therefore should we be looking at moving towards using pass/ fail criteria to add to the direct observation template? I would also implement a shift in moving the direct observation into being an assessment of practice rather than in its current format an assessment for practice. An assessment of practice sets a clear expectation of what levels need to be evidenced which would be useful to apply to the direct observation. Therefore by implication the areas not evidenced in this assessment of practice (summative) imply an assessment for practice and further development (formative).

Humphrey (2007) explores the discrepancy of how the direct observation is used by onsite practice educators and off-site practice educators

differently, she discusses how off-site educators appear to use the direct observation as summative and on-site practice educators as formative. Why might this discrepancy occur between on site or off-site practice educators? A reason could be related to the options to utilise other opportunities for the direct observation, so for example if the direct observation does not go well for the student, an on-site practice educator has more opportunities to repeat it or ignore it than an off-site practice educator. I would suggest that if any direct observation does not go well and raises concerns that it should be recorded as such rather than redone. I would also argue that if a student is unable to evidence a positive interaction with a service user at any point during the placement under certain standards, whilst this may be formative, it also raise issues of capability in being able to manage 'real' moments in service user lives. Whilst many direct observations do not go accordingly to plan, nor do service users lives either.

The direct observation is a tool for assessment and implies feeding forward, it emphasises positive areas for practice and areas for development (Kemp, 2001; Humphrey 2007). However at no point on the pro-forma (Skills For Care, 2012-13) used across England is a pass/fail criterion applied and yet it is the most crucial test. As an example within the driving test, the practice component is clear, how many errors are allowed and whether this constitutes safe driving. And yet no such criteria exists within the PCF framework, therefore what are we applying to the practice and actual observation. Some domains can be evidenced for one direct observation and not for the others. There are no specific domains which are considered essential. I would argue this needs revising.

The challenge is that not all areas of practice can be evidenced within any one direct observation. To suggest that percentages of domains need to be met may not be realistic however there are some domains of the PCF which surely cannot be ignored and need to be evidenced in order to maintain positive practice. I would put forward namely verbal communication skills, confidentiality guidelines observed, boundaries maintained and risk management linked to the PCF domains 1, 2,3,4 and 7. These if left unattended to can be detrimental to the welfare of service users in that real time moment. The decision of this would be down to the subjectivity of the opinion of an experienced practitioner, the practice educator present, and not the student or the service user.

It could be said that the direct observation is not real due the practice educator's presence, students do comment on this in their evaluative feedback which I have received from reflective sessions after the experience of the direct observation. However in my own experience, it is always real, the service users are always unpredictable and circumstances never quite go according to plan. My presence may make the service user more nervous however in my experience rarely is this the case; most times my presence offers some reassurance to the service user about some sort of fail proof that the student social worker is acting out their role accordingly and it is an important aspect of being in training that assessment take place.

In addition should there be more stipulation in what constitutes a direct observation opportunity, a process of what needs to be observed within any placement (Barraclough, 1998). There is an appreciation in which students can cherry pick service users for observation (Irwin, 2014; Humphrey 2007) and therefore whilst it is stipulated that most direct observations should be directly with service users, this is at the practice educators 'discretion' (Irwin, 2014 p.4). Should it be that the direct observation requirements are clearer and that a range of contexts are stipulated and in different situations? The recommendations could be clear such as duty cover, home visits, and face-to-face office appointments all involving service users. I do try to maintain that students are observed within a duty scenario with an unknown service user, a home visit or outreach scenario and a service user with whom they are working with and in particular perhaps one that they find most challenging in some respect. By doing this, I am testing out a range of aptitude and skills in applying knowledge and learning to practice. Scenarios such as a presentation to the team or multi-professional meeting surely do not qualify as service users are not present however they are often used to evidence other domains of the PCF. In becoming more prescriptive about what constitutes practice for observation, there is a danger of course (Heron et al 2010) with standardisation.

Timeline of the direct observation

There are another two issues for the direct observation, when to complete it and how it informs the assessment process. It is within my own experience that to complete a direct observation too early in a placement can be counterproductive. This is due to the induction process as students are just getting to grips with the agency, the work, and the role, therefore a very early direct observation becomes almost counterproductive as it would recommend most areas for their future development. There has to be something to test against. As practice educators we want to test out that students have absorbed knowledge, perspective and guidance such as the induction information alongside evidence of some early signs of assimilation of knowledge and understanding. In my experience a month to six weeks into the placement usually allows students to do this.

There is often a disparity between the first and the second observation, some findings have revealed that the first observation becomes, a period of grace and the second an alarm bell (Queens University Belfast, 2014) and therefore the unease for the direct observation assessment within the placement is one of continuum. You are expecting further progression as the placement progresses, so what you expect at the beginning is not what you expect at the end, what I would call the 'raising of the stakes'. The stakes are higher the further along the student is in terms of their placement days. This is especially true of the final placement, as I would suggest that a fail within final placements becomes extremely hard. The stakes are very high for the student who is at their final year of study and research informs us that failing students is an emotional experience in itself for practice educators and students (Finch, 2010).

In terms of the passing and failing of placements, the problem is that the direct observation informs the assessment however as stated does not explicitly benchmark a pass or fail. So as the student progresses along the timescale of the placement the expectations around practice become higher and the postponement of 'difficult decisions' gets harder (Brandon and Davies, 1979): more is expected to be observed and a higher level of performance needs to be achieved.

Therefore a gradient type of criteria could be applied; whilst in direct observation one some allowances are made, by direct observation number three almost three quarters of the way through the practice placement, few allowances can be made as the student becomes nearer and nearer to the prospect of qualifying. In addition the complexity of the work they are undertaking should be greater in order to prepare them for their first year in practice.

This in my experience is the 'sticky moment' (Dexter, 2008), when in raising a concern based on direct observations further along the timeline of the placement, it becomes harder for the student then to develop the required level or be given the time to turn it around. The purpose of the concerns process is to look at this and draw up an action plan which includes further direct observations. But as stated the further along in the placement the student is, the higher the level of practice is expected to be you, as a practice educator you are unable to suspend the required benchmark. This is most certainly the challenge for assessors.

I would propose that further guidance needs to be put in place so that the direct observation can be the only evidence of progress once a concerns meeting has been held and a balancing of decisions meeting could take place at the end using further direct observations as evidence. There is still discretion currently available after the review of the concerns meeting up to the conclusion of the placement. Without the clear pass and fail criteria applied to the direct observation, the decision to fail becomes harder and often practice educators adopt a fall-back position of using the good enough benchmark. This may be quite common with the first practice placement which sets up difficulties for the practice educator with students on their final placement

As Humphrey (2007) suggests to ensure transparency direct observations could be video recorded without practice educators present to mitigate against the rescuing of practice educators in over stepping the observer mark and becoming actively involved with the interaction. I am aware that some agencies may have this in place however there are challenges to the use of video recordings within some agency settings and this relies upon service users being comfortable with this, this appears to work if this is the norm for the agency rather than the exception.

Concluding discussion and recommendations for practice

In order to achieve reflective thinking, it is imperative to recognise the importance of examining the area which is the 'blind spot', what others observe of us but we do not (Luft and Ingram, 1955). This is of particular relevance to the direct observation. It puts practice into the forefront through the practice educator lens. This is also of value to develop a student's awareness of anti-oppressive practice and how practice can impact on others through exploring unconscious bias and viewpoints. These can then be explored in the reflective session after the direct observation takes place. This is also of relevance in considering the practice educators own bias towards the student and their achievements.

If the practice educator is able to maintain integrity during the observation and not rescue students through responding or actively participating in the interaction themselves and be truly in the moment, authenticity of the direct observation is achieved and the assessment valid. Others have explored the muddying of the water when practice educators overstep the observational role (Humphrey, 2007) and therefore further emphasis on direct observation skills could be assimilated into the requirements of the PEPS and developed within practice educator training opportunities.

Further exploration and guiding principles could be established from practice educators through conducting focus studies on what constitutes a suitable direct observation and a clear protocol outlined for what are the required components that need to be present to test out the appropriate levels of practice within placements. This would iron out some of the ambiguity in practice educators' selections of situations to be observed and get rid of those which are not sufficient and therefore raise the level of practice requirements. It is not that more students need to fail; it is rather that competence in practice need to be evidenced more clearly. A sufficient benchmark needs to be set and applied which uses a graded criteria at different stages of practice placements, both first and final. This would give a higher level of protection for service users and apply a more credible measurement criterion as a prerequisite for qualifying practice. In addition further reasoning for this could be linked to sustainability within the profession and enabling more newly qualified workers to progress and achieve their first year in practice successfully.

Of interest is Moriaty et al (2011), who highlighted that within the qualifying year there is certainly ambiguity in how the criteria of measurement is used and that this focused on preparedness rather than actual practice. This idea around ambiguity of measurements echoes my thoughts here of the direct observation and of what constitute positive rather than 'good enough' practice. As Moriaty et al (2011) stress the area of whether social work education is developmental or an 'end product' sets up similar problems for the qualifying year as perhaps the practice placement as a whole with its current assessment format could also fall into this ambiguity.

The use of a pass and fail criteria applied to the direct observation would be more effective to support evidence of achievements and failures. Possible domains could be examined through analysis of practice portfolios and the domains most commonly evidenced within direct observations and those most commonly required within interactions with service users. These common themes could be analysed in order to establish the baseline criteria of positive practice as opposed to good enough.

Further analysis could also be explored through research into looking at practice educators' reports to establish a continuum of practice requirements which can be evidenced within both first and final placements timelines. In establishing these benchmarks, which are stepped up as the placement timeline progresses for both first and final placements this would ensure that expectations for students and educators are clear and the direct observation plays a fundamental role within assessment. The stakes are indeed higher for final placements, and in a sense more critical for the profession.

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