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# **Commentary on Experiential Learning: Changing students' attitudes towards learning disabilities: How can we reduce exclusion further?**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper provides some thoughts following on from reading: *Experiential Learning: Changing students' attitudes towards learning disabilities*.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This commentary outlines some considerations for the continued development of using service users in tertiary education as educators.

**Findings:** The literature is not clear on the involvement of people with more profound and multiple learning disabilities, or for those who do not use much spoken language in tertiary level teaching.

**Originality/value:** A further cultural shift is needed to ensure that all people with learning disabilities regardless of their communication style have the opportunity to share their experiences within a teaching and learning context.

**Key words:** *service user participation; tertiary level teaching; profound and multiple learning disabilities; increasing participation*

## **Using service users to develop student learning**

Using service users to teach students studying health, education and social care subjects is not new. Nursing students have been receiving teaching from service users in mental health to gain insight into disorders from personal perspectives for sometime (Costello & Horne, 2001). Some educators at tertiary level establishments have identified that providing service user training across a range of clinical contexts could have the potential to decrease the risk of poor patient focused care by enabling students to see the person alongside the medical condition (Basset, 1999; Beresford, 1994; Le Var, 2002). Using service users to teach students has also been considered an important tool to challenge fixed cultural notions of perceived stereotypes within clinical groups (Basnett, 2001). Though this would seem a proactive method of enabling students to become

empathetic and client-focused practitioners, it is difficult to evaluate effectively the long term impact of this teaching once students graduate. No studies have evaluated long term follow up of learning benefits, and it is difficult to attribute cultural changes in public services to service user involvement alone. There are likely to be other variables other than service user teaching that could increase or reduce the effectiveness of how clients are cared for such as clinical placements when training, competing demands of work pressures and availability of support as well as cultural values both personally and in the work place.

Studies have shown that there are benefits not just for the students, but for service users as well (Basset, 1999; Beresford, 1994; Glazier & May, 1995; Hanson & Mitchell, 2001). More specifically, people with learning disabilities gain considerable confidence and self-esteem, as well as feeling that they enhance their life skills and communicative competence from these activities (Coleman and Murray, 2002; Harding, 2009; Harding et al, 2012; Hooper & Bowler, 1991). Anecdotally, the impact of training students has been great for the service users who visit City University London over the last eight years, with substantial increases in communication abilities being observed.

Many of the early studies had a greater focus on mental health service users rather than other user groups such as people with learning disabilities. At City University London, adults with learning disabilities have been used to teach speech and language therapy (SLT) students about their lives since 2005 (Harding et al, 2007; Harding, 2009). This was set up for a number of reasons. First and foremost, although students were training to be SLTs, many still had a limited knowledge of disability and people who used alternative and augmentative communication (AAC). Secondly, another reason for developing the use of service users to teach students was so that they had the opportunity to acknowledge and be aware of the presence of those people with more complex learning disabilities as well as experiencing a wide range of AAC during a presentation. As part of this, students were encouraged to reflect on their own thoughts about disability. After the first training session, SLT students gave positive feedback about the experience:

- “I did not expect the service users to be able to pass on such a strong message to us as a group about what was important to them. Their level of skill really surprised me.”
- “I had no idea about what we were going to listen to today. I thought it would be basic. It wasn't, and I have been given a lot more to think about. I'd really like a placement with adults with learning disability.”

- “I thought the first presentation was great because not everyone could talk. The nonverbal group member was supported to put her view across by gesture and photo support. I was very impressed.”
- “I thought that having the Makaton training was a great support for us. I'd like to do more. I also found it good to have the talk about the kinds of questions we should try and ask. I hadn't thought of how I would make my language simpler. It was a real challenge for me.”

These few comments touch on a number of issues that certainly warrant further exploration and study. First, the adults presenting, even those who were less verbal, appeared to be able to show greater communicative competence than the students were anticipating. This suggests that knowledge of disability is not pervasive to our culture and that if it was expectations of what people with learning disabilities can do would be different. Acknowledgement that being non-verbal did not mean you could not communicate was strong as were some interesting reflections on how students could modify language complexity to enable increased communication participation.

The paper [*Experiential Learning: Changing students' attitudes towards learning disabilities*] is an important addition to the small but developing literature on the subject of service user involvement in teaching. Of particular interest is that this is a group of psychology students which is refreshing as social work, nursing and speech and language therapy students have been prevalent in the literature. One of the main goals of the teaching was to promote an opportunity for students to meet people with learning disabilities with the hope that barriers and marginalization could be reduced. The authors suggest that these perceptions could possibly be changed by enabling students to experience and develop meaningful contact with a person with a learning disability. How to quantify the impact of such experiences is hard as it is influenced on a student's current life experience and personal values. Therefore, establishing what the real benefits are for both students and service users needs further research within learning disability partnerships and tertiary level teaching establishments. This must not remain something that is a superficial exercise on both fronts; there must be clear goals and outcomes for service users as well as for students.

## **How can people with profound and multiple disabilities benefit?**

The authors of [*Experiential Learning: Changing students' attitudes towards learning disabilities*] wanted to use people with learning disabilities in a teaching exercise to enable students to change their perceptions of disability. They cite the important work of Wolfensberger (1991) who described how a person is perceived and spoken to by others impacts on their own personal development and self esteem. However, they only used people who had mild to moderate learning disabilities. Although this is important there are also some questions that need to be considered. First, what happens to these service users once they have formed a friendship with the students? This is likely to come to an end, and the emotional cost to the service users cannot and must not be underestimated. It is appropriate to consider if the service users are in a position where they can use the skills and confidence gained to form an advocacy group linked to local learning disability partnership groups as happened with the service users involved in teaching at City University London (People in Control Launch, Harding et al, 2012)? Another issue that requires consideration is the actual population of service users who participated in the study. The authors of [*Experiential Learning: Changing students' attitudes towards learning disabilities*] used service users with a relatively high level of competence in that they were probably all capable of following a basic conversation, and using spoken language to question, initiate and respond to another person. This was clearly not a group of people who used AAC methods, or who had profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). These two groups are at high risk of exclusion as well as experiencing mis-understanding of their communication attempts. How can tertiary level educators include such service users as well as exploring an appropriate philosophy that can enable participation?

City University London has involved some service users with severe learning disabilities in the teaching curriculum. These service users have used a range of AAC methods to support their communication. As yet, there have been no inclusion of people who have PMLD. The communication style of these service users would potentially range from pre-intentional to intentional pre-verbal skills. Pre-intentional skills include reflexive and reactive abilities with some anticipatory abilities linked to meaningful contexts. Non-verbal behaviours just past this stage would include an increased use of facial expression, use of gaze, some imitation, an increased comprehension of routines and familiar people. Carers and familiar friends of people with PMLD are important in developing cohesive and meaningful ways of interpreting such skills and supporting

understanding of key events in a person's life using a range of alternative communication methods (Ware et al, 2004).

However, is it possible and is it appropriate to consider people with PMLD to teach students? It could be and should be possible. Through using the ideas proposed by authors such as Sen (1986) that extends beyond the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990) it may facilitate opportunities through considering a person's capabilities. Sen (1986) argues that individual differences can be used to transform what a person can do into valuable activities, and people with PMLD could benefit in this way through service user teaching. The balance between interpreting communication (hence the great importance of carers and friends; Ware et al, 2004) as well as learning not to over-interpret or miss communication cues would need careful planning and preparation for students. Consideration would need to be given to the high level of variable AAC support and use when interacting with people with severe and profound learning disabilities largely compounded by limited understanding of the AAC itself and the service user difficulties with being able to initiate independent use (Harding et al, 2010). However, student benefits could include an increased awareness of the communication needs of people with PMLD but more importantly, the range of communication styles of service users. There would also be a need for reflection on the importance of maintaining skills and gaining a consistent method of support, engagement and response rather than thinking of curative or developmental continuums of "improvement". This would be a valuable lesson in terms of future health, education and social care cultural values. For the service user, it will be more challenging, though not impossible to gauge perceived benefits and outcomes. Involving service users who have different communication skills, and who could therefore support the person with more complex needs to communicate is potentially a more powerful way of promoting increased participation and communication, increased social role validation and improved quality of life.

## **Conclusions**

Service user teaching at tertiary level establishments on courses for subjects that train students to become practitioners in health, education and social care is rated as being beneficial for both the service users themselves and the students. Positive methods have already been established, but to make sure that learning outcomes continue to be meaningful for both students and service users, a number of things need to be developed further. A wider range of service users need to be included in teaching in particular those with more profound needs. This is important if the barriers to inclusion which usually involve those who are less verbal in their communication are to be challenged. A culture of

potential values need to be explored more carefully with learning disability partnerships so that the reasons for teaching are transparent. Similarly, it would be hard to quantify exactly the longer term benefits for student learning. However, consideration of both service users and student benefits over longer periods of time would be important so that actual benefits can be understood more clearly.

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