

An evaluation of the use of the service user and carer mini conferences within the first year BSc Occupational Therapy programme

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Background

In 2003, the Occupational Therapy degree programme at CCCU decided to invite service users and carers into the classroom early on in the students' education. This fitted in with the wider move by the Department of Health to include service users and carers in the design and delivery of services. Occupational therapists need to be able to see a person as an expert in their own life so that they can genuinely work with them to provide workable and lasting solutions to living. In considering the best way to do this, it was noted that service users and carers were sometimes wary of attempts to include them. They dislike being placed into classroom situations to simply tell their story without understanding the learning context, viewing this as 'tokenistic' (Harrison, 2002). Many institutions have dealt with this by instituting training programmes for service users and carers in teaching and presentation skills (Leckey et al, 2008). However, not all service users and carers want to undertake such training and for the institution this is impossible to achieve without adequate time and funding. In order to address these two concerns, the Occupational Therapy pathway of the Allied Health Department developed an innovative approach based on a conference format. Embedded within the Participation in Occupations module were two 'mini-conferences', one called *Barriers to Participation* and the other *Enabling Occupation*. The mini-conference format is similar to that of a professional conference.

The mini-conferences had been evaluated highly in the end of module evaluation process, being consistently rated as the most valuable aspect of the course. The impact on student learning had also been demonstrated through a reflective element within the module assessment and this had shown a shift in attitude in a majority of students. There had, however, been no formal evaluation of the impact of the mini-conferences on student development. Informal feedback from the service users and carers had indicated a high level of approval for this model of involvement but the staff team had received some criticism about the lack of prior training for service users from external institutions also utilising service users. The aim of this study was therefore to investigate:

- the impact on students' learning
- the experience of service users and carers of being involved in the mini conferences.

Approach/methodology

The research was carried out in two parts. The first part involved employing one of the service user/carers expert panel members, Dr Diana Crampton, as a researcher to carry out interviews with five other panel members to produce a series of short journalistic interviews providing some narrative information about the person's life and an impression of being involved the mini-conferences. The lead researcher and three student researchers worked together to carry out a four-stage interpretative analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) of a one-question online survey to collect data from all cohorts who had participated in the mini-conferences (n= c220). The question was:

In what way, if any, has participating in the service user and carer mini-conferences in the Participation in Occupations module affected your development as a student occupational therapist?

Outcomes

The research carried out by Dr Crampton indicated that all the service user and carer interviewees were strongly committed to participating in the mini-conferences and perceived them as being beneficial to themselves, as in this way they were able to depict a story about their lives, as well as to the Occupational Therapy students. The experience delineates the service-users and carers as in some sense experts in a situation where previously it has been possible for certain people in authority to 'speak over' them. No interviewee had seen a downside in the experience. The format of the conferences was viewed as good, with just 20 minutes to speak. Being on a panel with people with different conditions, service users and carers, and with different experiences, but curiously similar in some ways, was interesting. As one interviewee commented "It's interesting to hear the strategies for staying well".

The results of the research carried out by the project leader and the students were presented as a letter to service users and carers. The results indicated a profound shift in attitudes towards future clients and appreciation of the ethical responsibilities of being a health and social care professional. For example:

Hearing about negative experiences made us realise the importance of collaborating and building relationships in future practice.

We gained an awareness of the lived experience of others and this gave us a new understanding of issues such as power imbalance and stereotyping.

It made us explore our thinking which led to greater open mindedness and self awareness.

The students involved with the data analysis said it had been a very useful experience – next time they read qualitative research they would understand more about interpreting the data and issues of validity. One student commented: "I realised the grand scale of what we were researching, and how detailed and intricate the process was. I felt a new appreciation for articles I've read in journals and also how bias may occur in findings". Another student who had been very sceptical about the authenticity of qualitative research said: "As the research progressed ... I became fascinated by how the raw material of individual voices refused to be manipulated out of shape by the sorting and re-sorting of 'data'".

Enhancing RIT

The research confirmed the value to Occupational Therapy students' professional and personal development of bringing service users and carers into the classroom. It also confirmed that the format of the mini-conferences provided a respectful environment for the panel members to share their personal stories. This has raised the staff team's confidence in the learning opportunity they have created and provided supporting evidence for its continued use within the programme.

Advice for others

One of the problems was that the students were out on placement when we wanted to carry out the research, so timing needs to be given careful thought. We had to run the project in July, when many students are already thinking about disengaging from university for the summer.

Reflections and any future plans

Rayya Ghul, the project leader, said:

Participating in the Research Informed Teaching project has been one of the most rewarding activities I have carried out as an academic. Having the students as co-researchers was exciting because it was an opportunity to share with them the excitement and difficulties inherent in qualitative data analysis. It is fair to say that I worked the students very hard over an intense period of time but it allowed them to have firsthand experience of working with meaning and interpretation. In addition, reading the service users' and carers' narratives produced from the interviews by Dr. Diana Crampton provided evidence that our experts do enjoy and appreciate the conference format we have developed here at Canterbury Christ Church University.

The work was presented at the *Authenticity in Action* conference in November 2009 and extremely well received. One conference participant wrote to say

I am not often impressed by presentations at these conferences, but your work, and your passion for it, were remarkable and inspiring.

It is hoped that at least two publications will come out of this project. If a similar project runs in the future it would be good to bring in a writing expert to help the students write up the research for publication.

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