

Chapter 11

Involving Service Users Through Digital Means to Enhance Interprofessional Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will provide guidance for educational practice founded on theory and on the experience of involving service users and carers in student education. Whilst this is an accepted philosophy and practice it is not necessarily easy to achieve. There are numerous ways of including service users in education but the era of digital media has added a means of bringing the service user into the learning environment and of overcoming many of the barriers to their effective engagement. The Centre for Interprofessional e-learning (CIPeL) has been engaged in developing e-learning materials which address some of the barriers to interprofessional education and issues related to user involvement in education. This experience is outlined and some examples from practice are given.

INTRODUCTION

Service user involvement in the education of health and social care professionals is part of a general drive towards user involvement in health and social services. The involvement movement has emerged powerfully from the perceived necessity for the public to be engaged in determining

their own health and wellbeing agendas. The aim of involvement is to improve health and social services by focussing on the needs of the service user (DoH, 1994, 1998, 2001, 2005; Waldegrave, 1996; Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 1997). This chapter will look at the issues arising from engaging service users meaningfully in learning experiences and will offer some solutions, through the use of digital formats, to challenges to this engagement.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-889-0.ch011

CIPeL is a collaborative Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The main purpose is to produce e-learning materials which address some of the barriers associated with interprofessional learning, including service user involvement in the production of e-learning. In the light of our experiences, this chapter will critically examine the challenges of collaborative involvement and of giving the service user a real voice in the development of learning materials. It will identify the main issues in the production of learning materials to ensure that they accommodate the multiple voices in interprofessional education. The intention is to provide guidance for effectively involving service users in educational practice through the use of digital formats.

BACKGROUND

The service user involvement movement has gained momentum over the last two decades (DoH, 2001). Increased access to knowledge and an increasingly customer focussed value base within society have both influenced the growing concept of consumerism as a basis for health and social care. The Patients' Charter (DoH, 1991) attempted to transform traditional conceptualisations of the NHS patient as a passive recipient of what the health service had to offer to that of a discerning customer of the service. Although the Charter was discontinued as part of the changes to health services under the NHS Plan (DoH, 2000a) the underlying ethos of encouraging empowerment of citizens specifically in health and social care services was reiterated.

A natural extension of this movement is within the education of students for health and social care professions and several policy documents have extended service user involvement into education and training (DoH, 2000b; Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 1997; Levin, 2004).

The policy of user involvement in student learning represents a move away from the notion of professional knowledge as supreme towards the notion of the service user/carer as holding their own expert knowledge about their condition or situation and that those who use health and social services are well placed to illustrate to students concepts such as human rights, anti-oppressive practice and the promotion of equality. As Taylor (1997, p. 117) points out, "*learning from service users challenges the whole notion of expertise, who holds it and on what basis*".

The contribution of service users to education is not new. Involvement of service users in the undergraduate education of nurses, midwives and health visitors (UKCC, 2000) and of social work students has been a requirement for some years (DoH, 2000a). There have been a variety of modes of involvement over many years from using the 'interesting' patient as teaching material to inviting the service user into the classroom. However, what has recently emerged is the recognition of the impact that service users can have on individual professional practice and perceptions (Levin, 2004) and that they can develop effective partnerships in service delivery and education (Barnes, 2000).

A further step is in interprofessional learning where user involvement in presenting 'real' life experiences helps to show students the importance of working interprofessionally with other disciplines and agencies to provide care that is truly focussed on people and their families. Essentially, the service user provides the link between theory and practice and enables students to look at their practice from a perspective beyond professional knowledge. This is especially important where collaboration between services and professionals is essential to the overall wellbeing of the service user.

It could be argued that during their work experience, students are continually learning from service users. In many respects this may be the best way to learn interprofessional collaborative

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