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**Dissertation as part of the Masters Degree in Research Methods
The Open University**

**Exploring the perceptions that social care students have
about the value of co-producing multimedia portfolios with
people with learning difficulties**

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1.1 Abstract

This research aimed to uncover the perspectives of twenty social care students working with ten post-16 learners with learning difficulties in the co-production of multimedia portfolios. The students' reflective journals written about their work with the learners, revealed insights into the working practices of the institutions where they were based and the obstacles that they faced in achieving their goals with their learners. Three core categories identified in the data were: context, student anxiety over time-constraint, and student satisfaction. The study outlines the aims and objectives illustrating the potential for the research to contribute to academic knowledge, and make a difference to work concerned with developing accessible platforms of communication with people with learning difficulties. Finally, the research discusses the implications of the study, theorising ways in which co-producing multimedia portfolios can be developed as a means of self-advocacy for people with learning difficulties.

Exploring the perceptions that social care students have about the value of co-producing multimedia portfolios with people with learning difficulties

1.2 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to uncover the perceptions of social care students as expressed in their reflective journals during the time which they spent working with learners with learning difficulties to co-produce multimedia portfolios. The students recorded the work that they did with the learners as well as their own perceptions of what took place during the day.

The module which the students were undertaking forms part of their university assessment. This module has run for several years in collaboration between the Rix Centre UEL (University of East London) and a post-16 college for learners with learning difficulties. No previous inquires had examined this process from the students' perspectives and the absence of this, offered a unique opportunity for a research study which could benefit other student care professionals and practitioners.

The objective of the study is to explore these students' perceptions by examining the core categories generated in the analysis using grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The analysis of the students' reflective journals is to reveal ways in which people with learning difficulties can work together with others to produce an accessible platform of communication. The literature indicates that people working with individuals with learning difficulties experience a transformation of their views (Rix and Lowe, 2010) that can promote effective practice. Other research, documents how people with learning difficulties may be socially excluded from society (Abbot and

McConkey, 2006) when their views are not taken into account. Bowes and Dar (2000) assert that it is essential to gain the perspectives of services users and multimedia portfolios co-produced with people with learning difficulties, can access people's lifestyles, needs and wishes. The multimedia portfolios are a tool for self-advocacy, and Bunning et al., (2009, 371) describe this as a 'rich... forging of links between images and meaning.'

The perceptions the social care students have about people with learning difficulties may be shaped by their own attitudes and beliefs (Grove and McIntosh, 2005) and this study's objective addresses any changes in students' perceptions. The transforming of a 'personal consciousness' (Campbell and Oliver, 1996) through working with people with learning difficulties may lead to a society that actively includes people with learning difficulties (Oliver, 1996).

The analysed data are from the students' reflective journals. The multimedia portfolios are looked at in order to contextualise the journal data and are not analysed. Although the portfolios are the result of the co-production between social care students and the learners, and are therefore of interest, this study is primarily concerned with analysing the process of co-production and not the end result.

This qualitative research project can offer insights into the challenges concerned with developing accessible platforms of communication with people with learning difficulties. The co-production of multimedia portfolios is a new approach and this study offers the first independent evaluation.

2.0 Literature review

Introduction

This literature review documents the areas with which this study is concerned. Environmental obstacles, such as, time-constraint, are highlighted by the social model of disability as ways in which society disables people with learning difficulties. This literature review presents a critical overview of this model and this model is linked to the development of self-advocacy. Self-advocacy is a way of presenting the wants and wishes for one's life and the multimedia portfolios co-produced by people with learning difficulties are an example of a self-advocacy tool and represents a part of the 'context' examined in this study. Self-advocacy is documented in the literature as both an individual act and the act of a group. It is described as a learning process for all involved and one that is vital to the social inclusion of people with learning difficulties.

The literature review considers critically a number of aspects of social inclusion. 'Social inclusion' is a difficult concept to define and the literature review attempts to illuminate a path through the various research perspectives which form part of a backdrop to the 'context' of co-producing multimedia portfolios with people with learning difficulties.

The title of the dissertation reflects one of the ways of referring to people with learning difficulties. 'People with learning difficulties' is chosen as many people with learning difficulties prefer this label which is itself a focus of discussion in the review.

In order to appreciate the professional and personal development of social care students and their perceptions of satisfaction, through their reflective journal writing, it is first necessary to outline the purpose of reflective journaling and therefore this is discussed in the literature review. The students' journals are concerned with their work with people with learning difficulties to co-produce multimedia portfolios. These multimedia portfolios offer a platform of communication for people with learning difficulties and the literature review discusses recent applications of new technology for people with learning difficulties and clarifies some of the terms used with this new and developing technology. Accordingly, the literature review is structured into 6 main themes:

2.1 Learning difficulties as a label

2.2 The social model of disability

2.3 Self-Advocacy

2.4 Social Inclusion

2.5 Multimedia as a communication tool

2.6 Reflective journal writing

2.1 Learning difficulties as a label

The history of learning difficulties shows how medical and positivist research has objectified and labelled people with learning difficulties and pursued goals which set them apart from the rest of humanity (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003). This research is very much 'on' rather than 'with' people with learning difficulties and is often rooted in a medical model of learning difficulties (Kiernan, 1999). The medical model locates the individual as the 'problem' to be fixed or put to one side (Goering, 2010). People are categorised by a label and disability, rather than being understood first as people.

People with learning difficulties and their organisations, such as People First, assert that the medical model categorisation by syndromes and labelling is stigmatising and can lead to the exclusion of individuals from mainstream society (Sutcliffe and Simons, 1993). However, the medical system and society still regard people with learning difficulties and people with physical disabilities as 'the disabled' (Barnes et al., 1999; Samaha, 2007).

'People first language' is a way of speaking and writing, about individuals who are labelled as fitting within a category of 'disabled'. It is a way of referencing individuals who have some form of disability (Tyler, 1993). 'People with learning difficulties' is the term chosen by some people with learning difficulties to describe themselves (People First). 'Learning difficulties' is preferred to 'learning disability' by the group, to engender the idea that the group's 'learning support needs change over time' (People First). Historically, people with learning difficulties have been labelled by others, and differently by respective generations, depending on the attitudes and beliefs about the place of the group of people in society at any one time (Goodley, 2001; Samaha, 2007).

The research on people first language is limited and criticisms of it are scarce. From a Canadian perspective, Titchkosky (2001) postulates, that people first language re-emphasises difference and abnormality by seeking to separate the individual from the disability. In addition, the article criticises the way people first language ultimately incorporates core assumptions of the medical model in its claim that disability 'just happens'. This re-entrenches the notion that disability is rooted within the individual,

removing the possibility of understanding disability in a social context (Titchkosky, 2001). However, it is important to remember that people first language is a first step, a point of departure from the language and labels that have dehumanised people with learning difficulties and people with physical disabilities.

In the movement away from 'disablist' language, the term 'people' or 'person' is placed before the characteristic held by the individual in each instance. Individuals are first and foremost regarded as 'a' whole person, rather than a hyphenated person or a characteristic that signifies inferiority which resembles a person. Similarly, the impacts of social and physical environments need to be adjusted to take account of the individual traits of people with learning difficulties and people with physical disabilities. The social model of disability challenges society to address what are disabling environmental structures.

2.2 The social model of disability

The social model of disability holds that much of the disadvantage associated with impairment is socially imposed, rather than inherent to the bodily or mental state of an individual (Oliver, 1990). The latter is a view from the medical model. The social model of disability is a progressive political concept that attempts to counter the medical model. The social model makes a clear distinction between the terms disability and impairment:

- Impairment – lacking part or all of a limb or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body.

- Disability – the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from mainstream social activities.

(UPAIS, 1976, in Oliver, 1990, p.11).

This definition of impairment was broadened to include sensory, and 'intellectual' or 'developmental' impairments (Barnes et al., 1999). Disability is a construct of the social and economic structures of a society at a given time and 'learning difficulties' are a social creation of a disabling society (Watson, 1996). Abberley (1987) argued that the experience of disabled people is historically and culturally specific. Impairment is socially constructed and meaning given to it through a variety of social practices (Chappell et al., 2001).

The social model calls for the individual and collective responsibility of members of society to promote a socially aware and active and inclusive culture (Oliver, 1996) to achieve a: 'Transforming personal and social consciousness...' (Campbell and Oliver, 1996, p.105). Essentially, the social model of disability provides a regrouping of 'our' thinking about what it is to be human and why that is of worth (Nussbaum, 2006). Oliver (1983; 1990) discusses a social model perspective wherein a 'disabled person' means someone who is disabled by social barriers. Arguably, many people understand 'a disabled person' to mean disabled by their impairment.

The history of people with learning difficulties and their stories have often been ignored. Exceptions exist, such as the individual accounts of Nigel Hunt's (1967),

Joey Deacon's (1974), David Barron's (1996) and Mabel Cooper's (1997) autobiographies. Mostly, it is the physical disabilities camp that has been afforded a socio-historical position in the social model of disability (Campbell and Oliver, 1996). Why have people with learning difficulties not been included within the social model? Simone Aspis, a self-advocate of London People First, suggests people with learning difficulties are consistently underwritten and that they '...face discrimination in the disability movement.' (Campbell and Oliver, 1996, p.97).

The social model of disability shows us how common attitudes and institutionalised practices unnecessarily disable people whose bodies and minds are considered 'non-standard' (Nussbaum, 2006). For example, Elaine, a self-advocate in the North of England with the label "learning difficulties", has written on her files by a Clinical Psychologist that she will 'never be able to learn to cross the road' (Goodley, 2001, p. 221). This results in great care taken to ensure that her taxi to the self-advocacy group drops her directly outside the meeting's building. As soon as the taxi disappears, Elaine crosses the road to buy 'milk and biscuits for the coffee break' (ibid).

This story challenges historic and medical models of learning difficulties that understand people with learning difficulties as simply 'the behavioural consequence of some embodied "impairment".' (Goodley, 2001, p. 221.). The social model perspective would suggest that Elaine is disabled in society by the constructs and restrictions that the medical profession place around her. Goodley (1997, p. 374) aptly quotes a self-advocate: 'The biggest disability of all is people's attitude – it's not us'. However, more recently, Goodley and Roets (2008) caution against ignoring

within the social model, 'impairment' as a challenging personal predicament (Shakespeare, 2006b). The obdurate nature of some impairments (Abberley, 2002) should not be overlooked and these are implicitly denied by the social model (Shakespeare, 2006a).

People with learning difficulties may be 'doing' the social model (Chappell et al., 2001), but they need support to 'write and articulate the experience in a theoretical language' (p. 49). However, the social model is not a social theory (Oliver, 1996). It provides a starting point for living with and by disabled people, and both pushes for social change while highlighting the importance of respecting individuals as they are. When individuals can practise self-advocacy, their need from their perspectives will form the greater part of respecting them (Goering, 2010).

2.3 Self-Advocacy

In practice, self-advocacy often means advocacy in a group (Atkinson, 2002). This may mean advocating for and with other people with learning difficulties. Shoultz (2005) argues group self-advocacy is the most vital and that there would not be national or state self-advocacy without local groups. Goodley (2000) notes in his extensive study of the self-advocacy movement, that the majority of the literature exploring self-advocacy is based around the self-advocacy group.

Self-advocacy is speaking up for yourself, standing up for your rights, being independent, taking responsibility for yourself (People First, Open University, 1996). Atkinson (2002) argues that there is a strong interrelationship between self-advocacy and life history research. Self-advocacy is seen in the contributions of people with

learning difficulties in publications with academics, such as Johnson and Traustadottir's (2005) book on de-institutionalisation and the experiences of minorities. Self-advocacy can also be about people with learning difficulties taking pride in difference rather than denial of difference (Walmsley with Downer, 1997). Although, the People First slogan 'Label jars not people' appears to owe as much to denial of difference as it does to pride in identity (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003).

Self-advocacy can be carried out individually or as a group (Goodley, 2000). However, there is tension between self-advocacy as a means for individuals to gain control and affirm identity and self-advocacy as a collective movement representing the interests of a particular group (Goodley, 2005). The latter raises suspicions about the 'conceptualization of ...self-advocacy, particularly by professionals, policy-makers and service providers.' (Goodley, 2005, p.342).

2.3.1 Individual self-advocacy

Individual self-advocacy is defined in a number of ways. In essence, it means that group membership of the self-advocacy movement is not necessary to engage in individual self-advocacy. Shoultz (2005, paragraph 12) describes individual self-advocacy as a 'lifelong personal pursuit of control over one's own circumstances.' It is the action of advocating for aspects of one's life: the wants, the desires, how to be treated within the family and within the community and its services. Pennell (2001) describes self-advocacy as 'a process – a way of life that is an ongoing learning experience for everyone involved' (P.223). 'Self-advocacy is about people working together to find their own voice, speak up for themselves... [and] make their own decisions' (Booth and Booth, 2003, p.182).

Shoultz (2005) suggested that everyone can practise individual self-advocacy, although this is generally 'invisible' for non-disabled people since it is taken for granted. For people with learning difficulties, individual self-advocacy is 'visible' and has a significant meaning. Goodley (2000) concludes that individual self-advocacy may include expressing thoughts and feelings in an 'assertive way', having control over one's lifestyle and knowing one's rights. Any of these may be expressed in either a formal or informal context.

Atkinson (2002, p. 122) proposes that individual 'self-advocacy is seen to be beneficial for the people with learning difficulties involved.' Atkinson (2002) states that self-advocacy enhances personal identity, raises self-esteem and supports self-determination. Simons (1992, in Goodley, 2000) defines self-advocacy as a process of individual development that enables a person to have sufficient confidence to express their feelings and wishes. New technologies, such as multimedia, are a way of developing self-advocacy by enabling accessible platforms of communication via co-produced electronic portfolios. The multimedia portfolios 'help to convey the personal agenda of the person...' (Bunning et., al. 2009, p. 372).

2.3.2. Knowledge of legal rights

Aspis (1997) stresses the need for self-advocacy to focus on changing policy. This is so that changes become protected rights rather than rights based on the 'goodwill' of others. Aspis (1997) notes that self-advocates must learn about legal rights in order to gain real change. She concludes that if control of the self-advocacy movement belongs to people with authority (care-givers, employers, service providers), then it will not be a liberating experience for people with learning difficulties.

According to Aspis (2002, p.5), self-advocacy is more than simply having informal interactions. It should include 'direct action, demonstrations, lobbies at full council meetings and how to influence Government legislation. All these approaches are about 'proactive change.' Dawson and Palmer (1993, in Aspis, 2002, p.5) suggest that in order to advocate: 'One needs to resist oppressive practices by challenging people in power.' Goodley (2005), states that in 'the politics of disability... self-advocacy is a key component' (p. 334). Aspis (2002) sees this as having the right to challenge others, to be angry and to challenge care-givers when necessary. This approach is a means of allowing people to speak up about how they understand their lives and enables them to seek changes, including 'a shift of power' (Aspis, 2002, p. 5). A shift of power is needed for the social inclusion of people with learning difficulties.

2.4 Social inclusion

Social inclusion or exclusion attracted attention in the UK during the 1980's and early 1990's. It became prominent following the election of the Blair Labour Government in 1997 and its establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit which later became The Social Exclusion Taskforce.

However, there appears to be a lack of agreement about the precise definition of social exclusion and this makes it difficult to identify the dimensions of exclusion. Saunders et al., (2007) provide a useful discussion of definitional issues and Burchardt et al., (2002) identify four dimensions of exclusion for the UK in the 1990's:

- Consumption: the capacity to purchase goods and services
- Production: participation in economically or socially valuable activities
- Political engagement: involvement in local or national decision-making
- Social interaction: integration with family, friends and community

Cameron (2005) argues that there is a 'deep and growing unease about the concept of social exclusion' (p.194) and that by not defining inclusion and what people are to be included into, the focus is placed entirely on the excluded individuals and the structural factors are obscured. Social inclusion becomes about 'a set of normative practices', of consumption and lifestyle, more than about the transformation of society (Cameron, 2006, p. 400). Bauman (1998) goes further seeing social inclusion as an exercise in 'normative boundary setting' where to be socially excluded is the exception and is deviant from the 'universe of moral obligation' (Bauman, 1998, p.77).

Notions of 'normal' activities within social inclusion concepts, echo medical model constructs by locating the fault for exclusion with the individual. The social model of disability asserts that it is society that disables and excludes people. Physical and organisational environments facilitate 'normal' people and impede the 'others'. For people with learning difficulties, the socio-historic starting point is that they are understood as 'other', and 'beyond the bounds of normal society according to some narrower definitions of normality' (Sibley, 1995, p.69). In short, people with learning difficulties are designated as not 'belonging' hence are socially excluded.

To be socially included requires you to be active, participating, useful and self-reliant (MacIntyre 2008; Parr, 2008), in specific ways and is centred on the economic and

moral expectation (Goodley and Roets, 2008) to move from welfare payments into paid employment. This is challenging for most people with learning difficulties and impossible for many. Labour Force Survey (2008) gives the employment rate for people with learning difficulties to be about ten per cent. 'Valuing People Now: a new three year strategy for people with intellectual disabilities, making it happen for everyone' (Department of Health, 2009), acknowledges the limited progress on opportunities for employment. Yet it continues with the core strategies of social inclusion centred on employment and other standards and expectations which are hard, if not impossible to reach for people with learning difficulties.

MacIntyre (2008, p.51) states that 'the whole notion of employment as a route out of social exclusion for people with IDs [Intellectual Disabilities] needs to be problematized... [there is a] question as to whether employment does result in greater social inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities.' Hall (2004) notes that paid employment for people with learning difficulties is '...economic inclusion, but this also includes the "normality" of discrimination, abuse and social isolation' (p.303). Redley (2009) states: 'Employment for those who have it does not redress their social exclusion' (p.492). Equally, engaging in their local communities does not necessarily secure a status of social inclusion (Hall, 2004).

According to Abbot and McConkey (2006), simply being part of a community does not assure greater social inclusion. Joining in activities and using local facilities does not necessarily create meaningful social contact with others, particularly with non-disabled people (Ager et al., 2001). Although, studies show that people with learning difficulties would like to be part of more community activities (O'Rourke et al., 2004)

and to have more friends (Froese et al., 1999). Participants with learning difficulties commented that they wished ‘... to be more involved in more community groups’ and to know ‘... people to say hello to when you go downtown’ (Abbot and McConkey 2006, p.282, p.279). These goals when mentioned in person-centred plans can differ in realisation across individuals and services (Gardner and Carran, 2005).

Other marginalised groups, in order to achieve greater recognition of their discrimination and social exclusion, have used advocacy to develop changes in society (Bersani, 1998). However, people with learning difficulties are frequently dependent on others to analyse the short-falls in their life arrangements. This may be one of the factors contributing to their continued social exclusion, even though there have been major shifts in policy and service, and service delivery to promote their presence in communities (Abbot and McConkey, 2006). Bowes and Dar (2000) assert that it is essential to gain new perspectives on services through accessing the services user’s voice. This will enable more appropriate provision to be developed. However, little attention has been focused on the lifestyles of people with learning difficulties and in relation to their social inclusion (Abbot and McConkey, 2006). Multimedia portfolios co-produced with people with learning difficulties is one way of accessing people’s lifestyles, needs and wishes.

2.4 Multimedia as a communication tool

‘Multimedia’ is multiple forms of media integrated together. Media can be text, graphics, audio, animation, video or photographs. Its use is often in conjunction with digital technologies, such as computers and mobile-phone devices. Multimedia and

digital technologies can play a significant role in developing accessible platforms of communication with people with learning difficulties.

'Enabling Technology...' (Blamires, 1999) is a term that has not proved to be long lasting, although the definition by the author is worthy of mention: 'The creative and sensitive application of appropriate technology in order to improve the quality of life of individuals and their range of life opportunities.' (Blamires, 1999, p.1). E-inclusion is a much more recent term which is often used to refer to the use of multimedia and digital technologies to create a 'level playing field' between people. Within research circles, e-inclusion has links with developments in the disabilities movement with an emphasis on issues such as agency and identity (Riddell and Watson, 2003; Shakespeare, 1994). At the same time, e-inclusion refers to debates surrounding the emergence of digital divides (see Selwyn and Facer, 2007) where inequalities are found in access to, and use of, multimedia and digital technologies for social communication and interaction, leisure and citizenship purposes.

Arguably, a modern society should be able to ensure technology is available for all at the point of need, to enable communication and enhance social interaction in the most powerful ways possible. The use of multimedia and digital technologies can enable a person with learning difficulties to have agency and independence and complement and respond to their social environment: 'Using a computer led me... to begin living on my own without always needing my mother around.' (Chappell 2003, p.32, in, Nind et al., 2003). Seymour and Lupton (2004) suggest that technology, and social networking in particular, might enable people with learning difficulties and physical disabilities to establish a presence which would otherwise elude them. This

would mean greater involvement in communities and communication, and engagement with their peers.

Since the 1980's there has been a focus within e-inclusion on virtual reality and multimedia (Brown, 1993; Cromby et al., 1996; Mechling et al., 2002). A number of researchers document the use of multimedia and digital technologies to enable people with learning difficulties to prepare for real-life activities (Lee et al., 2001; Standen and Brown, 2004). A criticism of that development would be a suggestion that a more effective experience could be offered through a real-life visit to particular venues.

People with learning difficulties and people who use Alternative Augmentative Communication may use graphic symbols for communication. Although symbol use pre-dates multimedia and digital technologies, it has been because of symbol software and symbol enhanced communication devices, that this practice has become so widely used (see, Widgit, 2010, p.3). Digitally-based and multimedia symbol use has developed from simple word-picture correspondence to a set with much greater capabilities (Abbott et al., 2006; Detheridge and Detheridge, 1997, 2002). Abbott et al., (2006) discuss the progress made with symbol use for communication through the availability of word-processors, desk-top publishing and web browsers which make use of graphic symbols. This has led to the widening of groups who use them, including people with learning difficulties.

It is likely, that young people with learning difficulties would prefer to use standard software or hardware, but with extra facilities built in (Williams and Hanso-Baldauf,

2010). This could be in the form of an alternative keyboard or mouse, a restricted set of options, or a new support facility not normally found on a menu. An example of this is the filter developed in Spain that removes tremor effects on the mouse cursor, a source of difficulty to some users (Rocon et al., 2006).

The increasing involvement of people with learning difficulties as consultants in technology-rich environments (for example, Seale et al., 2010) is another way of combating their 'disempowerment and... the denial of their voice in decisions relating to their lives' (Armstrong, 2003, p.124). The reflective journals of social care students, give an insight into the process of using multimedia and digital technologies to facilitate advocacy with people with learning difficulties.

2.6 Reflective journal writing

Reflective journal writing is used within a number of professions. In social work, reflection is recognised as an important aspect of practice, research and education (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995; Gould and Taylor, 1996; Napier and Fook, 2000). Moon (1999, p. 187) defines a journal as 'predominantly written material that is based on reflection and is relatively free writing, though it may be written within a given structure.' In the literature, scholars use a variety of words for 'journal' including, log, diary and workbook (Moon, 1999).

Journal writing generates reflection on experience. Dewey (1938) noted that reflection is the foundation of learning. Reflection allows the adult to reconstruct and makes meaning out of experience (Drago-Severson, 2004; Kegan and Lahey, 2001). Structured reflective writing often leads to self-knowledge and to greater personal

efficacy (Boud, 2001; Heimstra, 2001) and contributes to skills needed in professional life (Cooper and Stevens, 2010). Students in higher education have reported that, reflective journal writing had helped them to examine their fundamental beliefs and assumptions (McGuinness, 2009). Reflection is a self-critical stance that engenders openness towards sharing one's own perspective with others (Leonard, 1997; Fook and Pease, 1999; Hugman, 2003).

Doel et al., (2002) suggest a portfolio created by the student/practitioner is an 'invitation to a dialogue' (Doel et al, 2002, p. 50). However, the quality of such work depends on the learners' ability to raise pertinent questions conducive to learning. Haigh (2001, p.173) comments that you 'have to be very seriously interested in what is going on in the students' minds to deploy this learning strategy, or you must have a reasonably small class'. This indicates the sustained effort involved in writing and assessing reflective journals, as well as the possibility of 'discovering' students' perceptions. Haigh found reflective journals useful for making students 'self-conscious of the development of their learning' (2001, p. 168) and how his students were compelled to 'contextualise themselves and to construct their own understanding' (2001, p. 171).

Reflection in relation to social work has been discussed by scholars to identify ways to promote it. Evans (1999) suggests the use of reflective journals among other methods for practice learning in the caring professions. The reflective process can be undertaken by the individual student/practitioner or by them in interaction with supervisors or colleagues. Keeping a reflective journal can offer the individual a chance to grow and develop understanding. As Whyte states, this may not be easy: 'It

is the result of application, dedication... and above all a never-ending, courageous conversation with ourselves...' (Whyte, 2001, p.4).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Rationale

I considered several approaches at the outset, including the possibility of a quantitative approach to my study. However, this was rejected because the 'measure' of value is difficult, if not impossible to quantify in an objective way. I decided to adopt a qualitative approach, using grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) as the method for analysis, appropriate to capture the nuances of data relating to social care students' perspectives on the value of co-producing portfolios with people with learning difficulties. This method enabled me to explore the social care students' subjective responses about their experiences. The data consisted of reflective journals written by social care students during their graded module at the Rix Centre, UEL (University of East London), and the multimedia portfolios that were co-produced during this time. With appropriate consents, I downloaded the journals via email and accessed the portfolios online.

3.2 Research procedure

Analysing reflective journals

I was granted consent by the Rix Centre, UEL, (Appendix 3) to access the secondary data of students' reflective journal assignments (n=40) for winter 2009, and the associated co-produced learners' portfolios (n=20). 20 reflective journals and 10 portfolios, or data from half of the given student and learner cohort, were used for this study. This is because, during this time as a new researcher, I made a mistake of not

clarifying with my contact for the social care students, that the portfolios were co-produced at one institution. I had understood in conversations with my contact that the social care students worked with learners at one particular college. I intended to obtain the names of the whole cohort of learners (n=20) ahead of my visit to their college. On receipt of 10 learners' names and from further communication with my contact, I realised that the cohort of social care students (n=40) co-produced portfolios across more than one site. As I wanted to meet with learners to attend to my own ethical standpoint and due to time-constraints for this study, I was unable to schedule a visit to the second site. This meant I could only access the portfolios of half of the cohort of learners (n=10) and therefore, analyse journal data belonging to half of the cohort of social care students (n=20).

Although, the data was held by the Rix Centre who had given me permission to use the data, additionally, I wanted to satisfy myself that the people involved in the co-production of portfolios, would not object to their work being used in my study. Social care students were contacted via emails with consent forms attached (Appendix 2c), and proxy-consent forms and appropriately accessible information sheets (Appendix 2b) were emailed to parents/guardians/key-workers via the post-16 college.

There were two stages to the research process, the first was to obtain consent from the participants (Appendix 2c, 2b) and the second was to analyse the data. Students who felt comfortable with my research and were happy for their reflective journal to be used in my study, replied with their consent in an email to me. I also met with some of the people with learning difficulties at their college to talk with them about my study. This is in addition to the formal consent I received from the Rix Centre (Appendix 3), for my study to examine students' journal data and to have access to their learners'

co-produced portfolios. In the second stage of the research, the reflective journals were analysed using grounded theory.

There are two social care students for each portfolio co-produced. In total, in this study, there are 20 journals and 10 portfolios. Data from the reflective journals was analysed using Corbin and Strauss' (2008) method of grounded theory. The portfolios were not analysed, but were seen to contextualise the associated journal data. Following is a detailed outline of the research process that this study conducted through immersion into the data.

Analysis and data collection are intertwined processes in grounded theory. In this study, the data had already been collected so the analysis began immediately the data was released to me. Grounded theory stipulates that the researcher investigates in a systematic way, and is thus compelled to examine every route that will increase the researcher's comprehension of the data. This study used three sorts of coding that are central to the analytical process. They were open, axial and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Coding is essential to develop concepts and categories of data which eventually lead to the creation of a theory.

In this research, a concept became a theory by appearing consistently within the reflective journals. Equally, the absence of a previously identified concept within a journal raised questions. For a concept to achieve a secure place within the theory of this study, it had to be unequivocally relevant to the theory. In this way, the theory is protected against researcher bias. This process distilled out concepts which may

have been beguiling, but which were later abandoned if their relevance could not withstand detailed and robust examination.

Concepts

Concepts could not be constructed from the raw data. Events and actions that had been documented within the reflective journals that were indicative of discernable patterns were allocated conceptual tags. So, for example, when a reflective journal talks about, '...break in his routine meant...he would be less able to settle down...' then this was labelled 'importance of routines'. As other similar incidents were discovered which on examination fell into the same category as for example 'importance of routines', they were identified by the same label. The study in this way was able to gather the building blocks of a theory by assembling all similarly named phenomena. By using this approach, the labelling is refined so that it grows ever more abstract as the analysis proceeds.

Categories

Categories are fundamental to a developing theory. They are more abstract than the concepts they identify. To arrive at a category a more rigorous process is required. Concepts in this study were examined and their component parts analysed. The properties and extent of the original event and the situation in which it occurred and the way in which it was expressed, as well as the outcome, were taken into account within this study. It is by following this process that this research was able to establish categories that have explanatory force. Such categories became related during the immersion process into the data to create a theory.

Sampling

In this study, sampling is not related to persons or groups or periods of time. It relates to concepts and what these represent. In grounded theory, consistency is achieved by means of theoretical sampling. The goal is to construct a theoretical explanation by focusing on circumstances which gave rise to specific events. That is to say, by analysing the way in which these events were expressed, as well as the outcomes and any variations that may follow that expression. The intention is not to extrapolate the findings to a wider audience, but to be able to generalise within the data sample.

Analysis

Ongoing comparisons were central to this study's analysis. As incidents within the reflective journals were recorded, these were matched against others to discover their similarities and differences. The arising concepts were then labelled and compared. Eventually, they were grouped together. By employing comparisons, this study minimised bias through using new data to challenge concepts.

Memos

Memos (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) played an integral part in the formulation and revision of theory as the research process developed. Memos were created as immersion into the data took place. They were written 'in the moment' and started from the outset of the first coding session and were maintained until the research was finished. The memos included and expanded on coding sessions as well as the code notes. The memos also included the categories, properties, hypothesis and productive questions that were generated by the analysis.

3.3 The research context

The participants

Participants were social care students on a graded module of their MA course which entails a practical component: working over 2 months with post-16 learners with learning and communication difficulties 2 hours a week. Their aim was to work as student pairs with a learner with learning difficulties to co-produce a multimedia portfolio. The portfolio represents the learner's likes and dislikes, achievements and plans for the future that will serve as an aid to self-advocacy in their forthcoming adult placement. The students met their learners at the post-16 college in East London. There were between 5-6 post-16 learners in each group. The group has a teacher, support workers and key workers. Each learner is allocated a key worker.

40 social care students undertook the module at the Rix Centre, UEL, during the winter of 2009, and wrote reflective journals about their experience of working with people with learning difficulties. The reflective journals of 20 social care students were used within this study, detailed in section 3.2.

20 post-16 learners with learning difficulties took part in the project to co-produce their multimedia portfolios with social care students studying at the Rix Centre, UEL, during winter, 2009. 10 post-16 learners' portfolios were looked at for this study (see, section 3.2). The post-16 learners have profound and multiple learning difficulties. As they were in Year 13, they were in a transition stage between college and post-19 services. This meant it was a busy time for them and therefore, unsettling.

3.4 Research strategy and methods

I would first like to discuss the methods employed to gain access to the journal data, and then the portfolio data.

Reflective journals

Consent to access the data for this study was granted by the Rix Centre (Appendix 3). Further, to satisfy myself that participants were willing, I sought consent from the 40 social care students via email with attachments of a recruitment letter detailing the study and a consent form (Appendix 2c). This method of recruitment and of gaining consent proved slow and fruitless as the social care students were on work placements. Due to UEL confidentiality policy, it was not possible to obtain alternative email addresses or telephone numbers for the students.

In total, I received 7 replies from the cohort of 40 over 8 weeks of attempting contact. Although, I had been reassured within replies from social care students that their colleagues would be happy to take part in my study, informed consent from 7 participants was probably too few reflective journals to make any theory found in the data a robust explanation. However, this was an additional layer of consent that I was seeking for my own ethical satisfaction and I made the judgement that the 7 replies of consent were indicative of the whole cohort. Of the 7 replies I received with informed consent from social care students, 3 replies related to the 20 reflective journals used in this research.

Portfolios

Consent was granted by the Rix Centre, UEL, (Appendix 3). Additionally, I sought consent from the learners with learning difficulties who own the portfolios. In practice, proxy-consent could not be gained from parents/guardians in time for this study. Similarly, key-workers were unable to provide proxy-consent due to the post-16 college's policy.

At the post-16 college, I met 8 out of 10 learners individually who co-produced their portfolios. These students are likely to be representative of their cohort of 10. 4 learners communicated their consent to me to use their portfolios and 4 learners communicated consent via their key-worker. Although all consent given was informal, as a researcher it helped to satisfy my own ethical standpoint.

Research ethics

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the Open University ethics committee. Details were provided regarding how participants would be recruited, the procedure for ascertaining informed consent and the storage of confidential material. The method of data collection procedures and the preservation of participant anonymity is documented and the researcher's CRB clearance (Appendix 2a). Pseudonyms were used for the learners and students were allocated a number to ensure anonymity. All data was handled with respect and the dignity of participants prioritised at all times.

Part of the research plan was altered, detailed in section 3.2, and I was unable to access the full number of students' journals for my study. had discussions with my

supervisors who talked with the Rix Centre, UEL, to ensure that ethical conduct attained the highest level possible.

Informed consent was sought from students by the researcher. Furthermore, I met with a number of learners from the post-16 college in addition to the consent granted from the Rix Centre. These were additional ethical considerations to satisfy my own standpoint as a researcher.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

I have chosen to present my analysis and interpretation together, because of the interrelated nature of qualitative data. Categories were generated from within the reflective journal data. Three core categories have emerged from the analysis of the social care students' journals: context, student anxiety over time-constraint, and student satisfaction. Although, evidence was found for student anxiety that related to aspects of the core category of context, anxiety over time-constraint was expressed with significantly greater frequency and urgency. Evidence for the three core categories was found within 15 of 20 reflective journals respectively for each core category. However, it is acknowledged that because of the small number of journals, caution needs to be employed when extrapolating from this derivative.

Due to the volume of evidence found within the journal data to support the three core categories, only a selection could be presented in this short study. The following is an analysis and discussion of those categories and related sub-categories of students'

perceptions of co-producing multimedia self-advocacy portfolios. To protect their anonymity, students were allocated numbers and learners were given pseudonyms.

4.2 Context

Introduction

The context in which students are working with learners with learning difficulties, shapes their perceptions and experience. For the students this is a new experience. They are unfamiliar with the learners as well as with people with learning difficulties, and are unfamiliar with the specific needs of their learners, as well as the college and the college staff and the working practice of the college. The students are working under pressure to a deadline. The multimedia portfolio co-produced with their learners will be shown to an audience which will include their university professors. The alignment of these diverse factors within the category of context provokes anxiety in the students.

4.3 Discussion

How Student Contact is mediated with College

Students have expressed anxiety, frustration and dissatisfaction engendered by learner absence and poor organisation from the college. Student 11 arrived punctually at the college for her first meeting with the learner. She was kept waiting for half an hour before being told that her learner was away sick. She records: 'This was rather disappointing as I was hoping to meet her and get started with the project.' Student 2 arrived on time for the initial meeting but was unable to get into the college. The gate was locked and there was no provision for alerting the staff inside to open it. Although she admires the level of security employed by the college, her frustration is

obvious: 'Perhaps a buzzer or a sign could be affixed indicating to wait for staff to open...I noticed that visitors would tug hard on the door, as there was no sign. I think that eventually this will affect the lock.'

Student 12 is not able to initiate contact with her learner over the course of three visits as the learner is sick. Her anxiety and frustration are clearly indicated by the comments in the journal: 'Providing [Zara] is present, my next journal instalment will be written after a 4 week gap in the project...I am afraid of making wrong assumptions about [Zara] because I have not spent enough time getting to know her.' The student is facing a 'significant ethical dilemma.' She is reluctant to abandon the project because 'I have to complete the project...as part of my MA programme...', but she feels uncomfortable with the fact that with insufficient data about her learner the portfolio may be inaccurate and misrepresent the learner.

The difficulties of achieving and maintaining contact with the learners are clearly expressed by the students and identified as obstacles to the process of creating and compiling the portfolios.

Working practice at the Post-16 College

Very few of the students had any previous experience of working with people with learning difficulties. Student 12 states that she had previously worked with pupils with behavioural difficulties. Many of the students express anxiety about meeting their learners and finding effective ways of communicating with them. Student 7 observes at the close of her first session with her learner that 'It was a bit overwhelming and I

feel fearful of the challenge to implement an effective communication method for [John].’

Students comment on the challenges they experienced in interpreting staff interactions with themselves and the learners. Student 18 is puzzled that her learner has been allowed to miss PE, because she expressed her reluctance to engage; although the student has been informed by the teacher that the group are encouraged to make their own choices about which activities they join. ‘[Amy] decided not to participate in PE and was allowed to remain in the classroom as has been the case on previous occasions.’ The student is concerned that the learner’s health may suffer, but she also wonders: ‘can this possibly convey the message that it is entirely acceptable to only participate in things she really enjoys.’ Additionally, the student considers that ‘this might make her ill-prepared for the reality of society where she may not always have such choice.’ Could such a decision be driven by insufficient staffing or disinterest of staff in the learners, as is observed later by two other students on different occasions. Equally, by respecting the learner’s choice, the teacher is promoting Amy’s self-advocacy, which at this juncture is not apparent to the students.

The student appears not to have understood the significance of the teacher’s explanation which implies that the working practice of the college respects the choices of its learners. Her own perspective seems to be at odds with this. She expresses a view that is more in line with the medical model of disability in that the learner should be coerced to participate in PE, because in the student’s view, her health might suffer.

Student 11 worries that her learner who chooses to sit in a corner with a blanket over her head, and engages in a great deal of hugging, is not encouraged to explore other behaviours. Perhaps this behaviour is not challenged because that may require too much input from the staff, and so 'the path of least resistance' is followed. Again, this observation overlooks how self-advocacy is represented, individuals 'make their own decisions' (Booth and Booth, 2003, p.182). Student 9 is concerned that 'there is insufficient staff and resources for the learners to develop their own way of communicating.' Student 4 has read his learner's profile but finds no information of how he communicates: 'My inability to establish any appropriate form of communication with [Rob] made me feel helpless.'

On another occasion student 4 saw his learner fed lunch by the carer when suddenly he refused to eat. The student inquired if this refusal was normal and was told it was. However, the student observed that the learner: 'was signalling some kind of distress to the carer.' It then transpired that the learner had dislocated his shoulder and was in pain. The student comments that 'it could be the main reason for his refusal to eat.'

Student 8 felt unsupported when the care-worker left the room and the student and her partner were left alone with the learner, who also decided to leave the room. They realised that in this situation physical restraint might be required to stop her from leaving: '...as we are not trained to handle more direct contact with her in this way, we were left to cope and quite unsupported.' This incident highlights again, the unnecessary difficulties experienced by the students resulting from the inadequate initial planning preparation for their engagement with the college.

Student 11 describes how a worker was 'literally dragging and pushing' Margaret towards a room. The student expresses her concern that this may 'have been traumatic' for Margaret. On another occasion, the same learner has a sore forehead. This she picks until it bleeds. The student is anxious about this and asks staff to apply some cream or dressing. She records that 'they were adamant that they were unable to administer anything other than a wash with cold water.' The student observes that her learner 'seemed in quite a lot of discomfort.' Her face had 'an expression of pain and she was continuously touching her forehead.' The student demonstrates her inadequate understanding of the institutional context and the policy of the college.

Student 11 also observed that 'there seems to be a division between teaching staff and support staff highlighted by a lack of information sharing.' Although support staff said kind things about her learner 'they don't appear to know much about her learning aims and do not appear to be open minded about her.' The learner often puts her thumb against her teeth. When the student asked the care staff whether this may indicate she had toothache or was hungry or thirsty, they replied: 'no, that's just something she does.' The learner's Individual Education Plan identifies a need to improve sign communication. The disinterest of care staff in this particular behaviour, supports the observation that the student recorded earlier, about the inadequacy of dialogue between teachers and carers and this being possibly, as suggested by Student 9, the outcome of understaffing.

At the close of her last day with Margaret, student 11 observes that: 'Thinking about [the college] with it's high ratio of staff to students and my queries around level of care

and attention, questionable level of care had led me to question how transition to an adult day care facility will affect her health and learning development.' There may be an implication here for staff training. If the ratio of staff to learners is high at the college, it is difficult to explain some of the interactions the students observed between learners and staff.

Students' individual experience of post-16 college staff

The students' journals clearly indicate the level of pressure this project engendered. Their mettle is tested by several factors: unfamiliar surroundings, working with pupils with learning and communication difficulties, interacting with unknown professionals and their own inexperience. To feel anxious in those circumstances is predictable. The organisation at the college and brevity of the students' engagement with it, leaves many of them confused about the attitudes and practices of the staff.

Student 14 while working on the portfolio with his learner had a classroom assistant in attendance: 'I felt embarrassed and pressured because a classroom assistant was also present.' He explains that 'the helplessness from the feeling of expectation and my lack of ability to deal with the situation gave me an insight into how overwhelmed a service user may feel if pressured or unable to deal with a situation.' The student is puzzled by the way teachers and support staff relate to his learner: 'I felt they were overly abrupt or short tempered with her.' He does not ask for clarification of this behaviour, which suggests that he may lack confidence, or believes that the question might be negatively received.

There is a suggestion here that the involvement of the students with the college may not be seen as an asset by the staff. Student 18 describes a similar event in relation to his learner's reluctance to exit from her bus. The learner had an epileptic seizure on her journey to the college. One of the support workers '...was quite forceful with her and this approach contributed to the difficulty [Amy] was experiencing.' The student later reflects that from this event he '...learnt a significant lesson which is that sometimes the wrong sort of help can in fact be unhelpful and obstructive.'

Student 9 finds that communication with his learner is very difficult. The learner does not understand the "social rule", which requires her to remain at the lunch table until everyone has finished. She gets up from the table and incurs the care staffs' displeasure. This rule appears not to have been conveyed to Yvonne in a way that she could understand. The student offers a possible explanation: 'On reflection, I can conclude that lack of resources and insufficient number of staffing hinders [Yvonne] in fully developing her ways of communicating.' This comment is in contradiction to what Student 11 said earlier about high staffing levels.

Although there may be differences of approach across the staff to the learners, staff need to share the same philosophy of care. For example, one student may miss PE while another must remain seated until everyone has finished eating. Appositely, student 14 offers another reason why staff engagement with the learners may not be entirely comprehensive: 'The needs of the social worker or professional to meet certain performance criteria can clearly get in the way of a truly person centred approach.'

Student 1 observes that her learner uses her own personal words to describe objects. These words the staff refer to as '[Amy's] "own made-up language."' The student investigates one of these words and discovers that it has a very similar sound to a Gujarati word. This is Amy's language at home.

The student comments that: ' I realised that there may be many more words, gestures etc., that the staff (who are unfamiliar with this) are therefore unable to pick up on. This undoubtedly affects their ability to understand certain aspects of what and how [Amy] is communicating and what choices she's making about her life.' The student echoes Pennell's comment that self-advocacy is '...a way of life...an ongoing experience for everyone involved.' (2001, P.223).

There may be two reasons for the implied criticism expressed by the students of college staff behaviour. The first is the students' own unfamiliarity with the college philosophy which underpins staff practice. This is exemplified by staff refusal to allow a learner to leave the lunch table before everyone had finished eating. Such a refusal is common in parental practice and social expectations of acceptable behaviour. This concept may be, what prompted the staffs' insistence that Amy remains at the table, at the risk of undermining her attempt at self-advocacy.

The second reason may be indicative of staff reluctance mentioned earlier, to accept and therefore involve, the students in their working practice and consequently, the staff's reluctance to explain their actions to the students. This being exemplified also by the absence of a direct explanation of why Amy was permitted to miss PE. This in turn may be a reflection of insufficient staffing, suggested earlier by Student 9, which

in turn could exacerbate the constraints of time. These circumstances would not be conducive to explanation and discussion of staff working practice with the students. A careful examination of the students' journals indicates what appears, in several instances, as an absence of staff interest in clarifying their working practice to the students.

Student 1 makes a pertinent observation relating to staff needs that '...the importance of supervision and other opportunities for staff working with service users to discuss their anxieties [is important], as otherwise the anxieties themselves could become disabling and affect workers' ability to offer care for service users that draws on their own experience and intuition.'

Summary and implications

The analysis of the context reveals that students found the unfamiliar aspects of their situation challenging. The contradictions across some journals highlight their subjectivity. Students were under pressure of time and confronted by several unknowns such as: their learners, the organisation of the college and the unfamiliar professionals whose working practice was unknown to them. The difficulties experienced by the students stemmed from insufficient liaising and communication and information sharing between the institutions with which the students were engaged: their university and the college. The implications which arise from this are, that the overall planning and organisation of the students' engagement with the college needed to be more focussed. There are also implications for staff training at the college.

The opportunity for a preliminary “fact finding mission” would have given the students time to meet the staff in a stress-free situation, as well as offering the possibility of discovering in advance the identity of their learners and be shown their timetables and Individual Educational Plans. This information would have allowed the students more time to focus on and prepare for their learner before the start of the project. Such an informal visit may have prompted the staff to discuss their working practice with the students and thereby provided them with a clearer understanding of the working practice and ethos of the college.

4.4 Student anxiety over time-constraint

Introduction

15 of 20 students expressed their anxiety resulting from the pressure of insufficient time in which to establish effective communication with the learner and to create with them, an adequate portfolio. This pressure arises initially from the high level of learners’ absence. Although this is very stressful and inconvenient for the students, the learner group with whom they are working experiences a high degree of ill health. ‘Illness and absence rates are high in individuals with learning difficulties; therefore it is essential to identify the possible consequences of this to ensure the individual’s development does not suffer.’ (Blackwell, 2006, p. 517).

The analysis of the journals makes clear, that much time is spent by students travelling to the college only to discover that their learner was sick and absent. The journals document clearly the reasons for the learners’ absence. In addition, students appear to be uninformed about their learner’s timetable, which results in their sessions with the learner being cut short because of other activities, such as

hydrotherapy, which leave the learner exhausted, or educational visits of which the student is not appraised beforehand.

Although this time could be perceived as “wasted”, the students’ focus on the project motivates them to either, spend the time reading and researching the traits of their learner or joining the learner’s group anyway and maximising their experience by observing other learners. Inadvertently, by focusing on the medical diagnosis of learners, students subscribe to an individualised model of impairment.

4.5 Discussion

Student 7 expresses her anxiety over the passage of time: ‘I feel rushed with anxiety, as time is going by quickly and I have not really “crack the nut” in identifying an effective way of communicating with [John].’ Her observation is recorded within the situation in which she has been to the college three times and not succeeded in making contact with the learner. She is anxious about not having enough time to complete the multimedia portfolio. She reduces her anxiety by rationalising that the learner’s absence gives her extra time to reflect and work on the portfolio content.

Student 16 has similar worries about insufficient time to produce the portfolio: ‘Today...I wanted to focus only on her strengths, so we could use it for the multimedia portfolio.’ She has not seen her learner for three weeks. She is conscious that this represents nearly half the available time left in which to create and produce the portfolio. The learner is a visual learner and the student decides to use PECS (picture exchange communication system) to facilitate and encourage the learner in making choices. Using this resource she attempts to stimulate communication to discover the

learner's likes and dislikes which will form one of the components of the advocacy portfolio. Unfortunately, the results are not as anticipated. Her learner places all the cards depicting various objects into the "likes" column. This outcome compels the student to rethink and restructure the learning situation.

Subsequently, she presents the learner with just two cards to consider in each category. This again proves unsuccessful as the learner cannot formulate a clear decision. The student seeks a possible explanation for this difficulty and finds that Stalker and Harris (1998) discuss "intimidation", whereby a participant required to make a choice fails to do so because of anxiety that his selection may be considered "unpopular".

Student 4 is anxious about inadvertently, perhaps, rushing the learner because time is short, to establish communication and interaction. As a result, Rob withdraws. The student verbally attempts to elicit a communication from his learner about his likes and dislikes. He receives no indication of choice. He touches the learner's hand, but that is withdrawn. He searches for reasons to explain Rob's impassivity. Eventually he decides that '...it could as well be that the time I gave [Rob] to prepare himself for me was not enough.' The student appreciates adjustments need to be made, and in so doing, aligns himself to the social model of disability.

The student attempts a different approach. Perhaps observing the learner more keenly, will reveal clues to other ways of communicating with him. He observes that Rob opens and closes his eyes a great deal. He decides to imitate this behaviour,

hoping that the action will catch the learner's attention and give him a sense of participating in the interaction.

The student's strategy now enables self-advocacy to '...allow [Rob] to take the lead, for me to respond...I had to treat each of his actions (ie. if any) as an attempt to communicate with me.' The plan however, does not have time to develop because '...after just 35 minutes the driver came to pick him up to [go to] the museum.' Although, the student does not record any attempts to familiarise himself with the learner's schedule for the day, it may have been useful for him to know about the museum visit before hand. Perhaps arranging a different day or time to visit the learner, which in the event was cut short at a crucial juncture in the interaction.

Student 10 is concerned that she is behind in the production of the portfolio: 'I became even more anxious that the date for students visiting at UEL was closing in yet I was not ready which could make us lose marks.' The visit to UEL with the learner will be when the portfolio is presented to an audience including university professors. The student has not had contact with the learner for three sessions. She expresses her anxiety several times: 'I realised that by not seeing [Shaun] on a regular basis, I would not be able to interact enough with him and therefore, would not have much to write about in the multimedia exercise.' Her expression of angry desperation is clear: 'Having not seen [Shaun] for three weeks I personally felt let down by his attendance and that it was a waste of time...I thought maybe I could have chosen someone else more available to work with.' Nevertheless, this disillusionment again has a positive outcome. The student determines to use the available time to work on the portfolio.

Summary and implications

Time-constraint is a significant barrier to the co-production of the multimedia portfolios. Factors within the context as well as insufficiency of time impinge on this endeavour. The portfolios are to be presented at a time specified by the university, the learners have a high absence rate and the students are unfamiliar with learners' individual college timetables. The confluence of these factors has implications for the students and causes high levels of anxiety.

Time-constraint gives rise to the disturbing outcome that, for some learners, the aim of self-advocacy would not be genuinely achieved because the portfolio was not adequately representative or because the learner's self-advocacy was not realised, as their portfolio was not completed. In two cases, the multimedia portfolio is empty. Time-constraint for the co-production of the portfolios encapsulates what the social model asserts, is society disabling people by creating environmental structures whereby the needs of some people cannot be met (Oliver, 1990).

The time structure for the students' module means that the needs of some learners have not been sufficiently considered. Students only have 2 hours each week with their learners. It is apparent from the analysis, that the planning of students' timetable for their module at the Rix Centre, must be much more carefully aligned with the timetable of the post-16 college. It must take into account, half-term breaks, learner routines such as hydrotherapy sessions, educational visits for the learner, and develop a system whereby learners' absences, as they occur, can be communicated to the students.

It appears likely that for all learners to benefit from multimedia self-advocacy, the course length at the Rix Centre would need to be extended significantly. For multimedia self-advocacy to be a '...rich...forging of links between images and meaning' (Bunning et al, 2009, p.371) for people with learning difficulties, time-scales would need to be appropriately adjusted.

Aspects of student anxiety related to the work with their learners, could well have been reduced through improved communication and initial planning either by the college, the university, or both. It is clear from examining the students' journals that being kept waiting at the gate, turning up to meet learners who were absent through sickness, cutting short their sessions with the learners due to exhaustion following hydrotherapy or impending educational visits, of which they were not appraised beforehand, became a source of anxiety for the students, as this decreased their time for interacting with the learners. It is unlikely that these impediments were a deliberate strategy on the part of the college. The students' experience intimates that the preparation by the college to engage in this project with them, may have been insufficient.

4.6 Student Satisfaction

Introduction

From the analysis, satisfaction was identified as one of the three core categories. 15 of 20 students in this study clearly expressed within their journals, their satisfaction with the experience of working with learners with learning difficulties. Their sense of achievement is wide ranging with 5 themes occurring most frequently.

4.7 Discussion

Self-discovery and development

Self-discovery is highly rated by the students. On his initial visit to the college student 5 did not expect his ways of ‘...thought and behaviour...to be challenged.’ He saw himself as a “good communicator” and expected this ability to facilitate his communication with the learner. However, the learners he meets immediately challenge this belief: ‘...very soon after arriving I realised how difficult it is to communicate with someone whose life does not follow the same pattern as yours, whose behavioural patterns, needs, wants, morals and norms were completely different to mine although equally as valid and important.’

As his experience of the learner grows, so does the change in his own understanding and perception of learning difficulties. Pennell (2001) notes that self-advocacy is a learning experience for all involved. The student closes the journal with increased self-knowledge and respect for the learners who taught him so much; ‘...going into a new situation...working it out for yourself...always being continually surprised and taught by the person you are working with.’ His observation echoes Rix and Lowe (2010, p. 218) who comment that: ‘People in all walks of life find that their views of effective practice are transformed by their involvement with people with learning difficulties.’

Student 1 initially holds back from interacting with her learner. She feels uncertain of how to behave. The learner communicates through laughter and giggling to express her feelings of friendliness and interest. After a couple of sessions with the learner and research into Intensive Interaction (Hewitt, 2009), the student develops greater

confidence and can subsequently join in the laughter: ' I felt encouraged by the connection I felt with [Amy] as we looked at each other and laughed together.'

The student also considers what constitutes 'empowerment': ' I used to think of empowerment as a grand word for grand gestures, but have discovered through my work with [Amy] that empowerment begins with you as the practitioner becoming humble enough to give control to the service-user and not set the agenda yourself.' This student's perception of what empowerment signifies undergoes a transformation as a result of the work with the learner: 'What I once thought was relatively insignificant, such as letting [Amy] choose what activity to do or whether or not to attend P.E., was actually the foundation stone for the empowerment of her as a person, able to take her own decisions.'

Student 16 reflects on how her perception of herself has changed as a result of the work she has done with her learner: 'I have also learnt about myself that if the person responds to me and seems to enjoy my company, I become more motivated, and self-confident.' As Thomson (2009, p. 102) states: 'Much of what we have to offer comes from our own personality or our own resources.'

Student 18 had earlier expressed her doubts concerning the wisdom of allowing Amy to miss PE. It is interesting to note the differences in perception of the significance of this event between students 1 and 18. Grove and McIntosh (2005, p.5) observe that: 'You (the worker) too will have your own attitudes, feelings and beliefs, and these will inevitably influence the way you see and interpret the person's needs, choices and interests.'

Motivation to find out more

All the students seek out supporting research for exploring and deepening their understanding of the learners' difficulties. Student 19 is anxious that she cannot understand her learner's communication which involves a lot of pointing: 'I began to feel guilty as I could not understand [Zara]...'. The student is determined to find a way of communicating with her learner and researches this area. She discovers that speaking to family and close relatives is recommended for discovering the ways in which a learner communicates. However, the student rejects this approach as she believes that '...people can never truly know an individual.' She observes that this belief is based on her own experience: 'This is something that sits very uneasily with me as a result of past personal experiences.' She is determined to pursue her own research: 'I feel that I need to do some more research into this area, to ascertain Zara's wishes without asking others.' Knowing Zara's wishes is of paramount importance to the student. This will support Zara's advocacy.

The student's journal clearly charts the growth in her own self-confidence and self-belief. From an apprehensive start: 'Prior to the session I was extremely nervous as I had not had previous experience working with people with learning difficulties.' She worries that '...if I do not feel confident in what I am doing...others may feel that I am not capable of getting the basics of social work practice correct...I worry about what others may think of me.' The student's lack of confidence and her self-doubt are transformed over the period of her engagement with the learner, culminating in a final positive self-assessment: '...getting to know [Zara] has been an invaluable experience, she has taught me practical skills...I have learned so much in regards to

working with people with learning difficulties, and the process and importance of multi-media advocacy.'

Student 20 is initially '...very excited but nervous about what was expected of us.' His learner has no verbal communication and the student worries how he and his partner will be able to demonstrate their pleasure at meeting him. The student is informed that the learner relies on sensory communication and is very tactile. However, the learner's file is not specific about his method of communication.

The student begins the interaction with his learner by using the technique of Object Reference (Stevens, 1976). He has researched this, as well as behaviours related to Autistic Spectrum Disorder, because he has identified some of his learner's traits as being symptomatic of it. The student uses a variety of approaches to stimulate communication with his learner. In spite of the challenges and hard work, the student is enthusiastic about the outcome of his efforts: 'I found the work we carried out during this Module particularly constructive, whereby we established beneficial service-user relations to advance my learning experience.' This statement indicates the student's self-interest and his approach locates the challenges of communicating with the learner within the medical model. Rather than co-creating communication with his learner, the student believes that the literature may provide a template for this communication challenge.

Stimulating creativity and imagination

Establishing communication is perceived by the students as fundamental to initiating interaction and forming a relationship with their learners. The students search the

literature for theories and methods to aid them in this endeavour. However, 7 students discover through their own practice, that by observing and listening to their learner, they are able to relinquish their established preconceptions of what defines communication. They are free to use their imagination and their learners' guidance to accept and adopt ways of communicating outside their own previous experience.

Student 12 feels 'very nervous' about meeting her learner. She is concerned about the unfamiliarity of the learners and the '...difficulties of communicating with people without the gift of language were all points of apprehension.' However, these negative perceptions are dispelled by the greeting she receives from her learner '...the first thing [Zara] did was grab my hand and made me give her a cuddle!' The student is astonished by this approach. She is concerned that although she discovers that the learner is '...an extremely communicative individual' not enough attention is given to her by the staff to promote her own ways of communicating. She feels that the learner would benefit from communication devices such as Talking Mats (Research and Development Centre, 2009).

However, in spite of the absence of this identified aid to communication, Zara succeeds in communicating to the students her own enthusiasm for fun and humour by teasing them over which one she will allow to feed her lunch. When the dessert arrives, the learner laughingly swaps the students' roles. This interaction convinces student 12 that her learner has her own effective ways of communicating without words: 'We are learning more and more of each other's communication, and she has demonstrated that she's using us to develop her communication.' This reciprocal nature of the interaction illustrates features of the social model of disability and self-

advocacy. By sharing communication in this way, the student and Zara are interacting as equal partners in this exchange. Zara is demonstrating her ability to communicate as an equal.

This realisation galvanizes the students' creativity to seek out new ways to communicate with Zara. The student teaches Zara how to use the joystick and shows her on the screen, pictures of herself which will be included in the multimedia portfolio. The student discovers, as a result of the lunch-time interaction, that '...perhaps unknowingly she has adopted ...one of the key principles of Intensive Interaction...to develop [Zara's] communication skills...[this] allowed the learner to lead and direct ...the interaction.' Student 12 reflects that allowing the learner to lead the interaction is a key component of social work practice based on the social model of disability: 'The project has certainly had a big impact on my social work experience. I will never make the assumption... that [Zara] didn't understand much of what I was saying... that just because a service-user is non-verbal this doesn't mean they don't have language.'

Student 18 was 'particularly anxious' about the first meeting, as she had no previous experience of working with people with learning difficulties. The outcome of this was that she prepared '...as much as possible in advance' to ensure the interaction with Amy would be effective. She discovered from her research into learning difficulties, that touch is something often denied to people with profound and multiple learning difficulties and yet touch appeared very important to Amy. This knowledge encouraged the student to reciprocate when her learner smelt the back of her hand at their first meeting. Amy communicated with a variety of gestures which the student

learnt to interpret. She became very aware during time spent with Amy, and through her own research, how important practice and the acquisition of skills are to understanding the learner's communication. Arguably knowledge needs underpinning with skills which are gained through practice and experience.

Discovering the usefulness of multimedia advocacy

The co-production, completion and presentation of the portfolio is the goal the students must achieve. For most, this task is a source of considerable anxiety as they felt pressurised by the constraint of time.

Producing the portfolio entails getting to know their learner and in most instances, discovering how they communicate since many have no verbal communication. The multimedia portfolio will serve as a facilitator for self-advocacy for the learner when they move from the college to adult provision. It is important that this document is accurate and representative of the learner.

Student 18 describes how watching the pictures of Amy interacting, informed her more precisely about the significance of that particular interaction. The pictures '...conveyed quite meaningful interactions which also presented different sides of her personality that had not been obvious in our previous sessions with her.' The student is impressed by the way the learner directs a colleague to sit in a particular chair without any verbal communication. This is a significant event for the student because she realises that Amy is '...beginning to grasp the skills of self-advocacy.'

The experience of student 11 supports this discovery. She's able to show Margaret communicating non-verbally on film which '...would be difficult through words.' Margaret uses noises and a variety of physical movements to convey meaning '...accurately conveying to another person the noises she makes is tough using words and instantly understandable with the use of multimedia.' With multimedia, meanings can be '...conveyed without complete recourse to language...' (Bunning et al., 2009, p.371). The student makes the pertinent observation that '...other people may observe different things to me and may offer an alternative response to [Margaret's] behaviour, opening up more possibilities to working with her.'

Informing students' practice as care workers

Many students acknowledge that through working with the learners their professional development has been enhanced. Most began without previous experience of work with people with learning difficulties or practical knowledge of how an establishment in which these learners are educated, works as an institution. The experience for them all had been one of self-discovery, increased knowledge about people with learning difficulties, and the ways in which they may require medical support, for example for epilepsy or diabetes.

Student 13 has researched various publications to aid her communication with Margaret. She concludes that: 'The focus on a positive approach to the service-user and what they can, and have the potential to do, was a theme that seemed to run throughout theories and advice on developing communication with service-users with learning difficulties and also seems an approach which can and should be applied to all areas of social work.' The student initially finds that '...meeting [Margaret] totally

challenged all of my preconceptions.’ Although she found the interaction with Margaret ‘rewarding... it was completely out of my comfort zone.’

The only alternative that the student uncovered to “accepted” verbal communication, was “baby language” and she used this to communicate with Margaret. As the student gets to know Margaret better, she finds that communication does not have to be verbal. She observes that she would have learnt more about Margaret’s communication if, instead of asking the care staff she had ‘...adjusted her own communication technique rather than expecting her to understand ours.’ This adjustment relates to work supported by the social model.

Student 9 writes with feeling about her work with Yvonne and ends her journal by saying: ‘It has been a wonderful experience, full of fun and laughter and working with [Yvonne] taught me invaluable lessons about the challenges and difficulties disabled people have to conquer in their daily life.’ During her work with Yvonne, the student discovers new ways of communicating with her. Yvonne has no verbal language and the student learns that ‘... we still can communicate with her we just need to be more creative.’ The need for creativity leads the student towards communicating with sound and movement, singing, clapping and dancing with Yvonne. The student also discovers that progressing at the pace of her learner is very important. Firstly, to avoid over-whelming her with too many activities and secondly to give Yvonne control over the interaction. Adjusting the learning environment to the traits of the learner reflects the social model.

Yvonne teaches the student how to maintain communication with herself. She taps the student's chin rapidly to encourage her to continue talking and singing. Sensory stimulation, the student has found out, is useful because '...it can also increase the level of positive communication and have some impact on decreasing negative communication.'

Summary and implications

The students' expression of satisfaction with their experience highlights its practical aspect. The opportunity to work with an individual with learning difficulties in an educational setting is seen by many as invaluable. The students' learning is multifaceted and is enhanced by keeping a journal (Whyte, 2001) and working with a partner. This encourages reflection and discussion of their own learning.

Engaging professionally with the learners transforms the perceptions of the students about the nature of people with learning difficulties. It perhaps goes some way to achieving what the social model identifies as a: 'Transforming personal...consciousness' (Campbell and Oliver, 1996, p.105). Their initial anxiety about achieving interaction with the learners is dispelled by the reality they confront. The students learn in a direct and personal way that there are many ways of communicating and of adjusting appropriately to the traits of the learner.

From the analysis most students felt out of their depth and unsure of how to 'be' around people with learning difficulties. During the time that they spend with the learners, the students find that the learners are people like themselves, and what they have in common above all, is their shared humanity (Nussbaum, 2006). The work on

the co-production of the multimedia portfolios stimulates the students' creativity to find different ways of representing their learners. This co-operative effort increases the students' confidence in working with people with learning difficulties. The experience will inform their future practice and may encourage them to use this communication method to prompt self-advocacy. The experience similarly serves as a self-advocacy aid for the students' future career by developing their self-awareness and understanding of people with learning and communication difficulties.

There is an issue apparent within the findings, which suggests that the benefit of the co-production may be greater for some students than for their learners. For example, 2 portfolios contain no information about the learner, although the journals associated with the co-production, document the students' personal and professional development and an increase of confidence to support their future careers. Although not all of the co-produced portfolios for every learner are fully representative, the attention and pleasure which they derived from working with the students should not be underestimated.

5.0 Limitations of the study

The study is reliant on the social care students' observations and thoughts. It is difficult to say with certainty that the experiences detailed within the reflective journals are accurate portrayals of what actually happened. This is because the social care students have written the reflective journals as part of a graded assessment. It is perhaps likely therefore, that some journals may reflect more of what a student believes will gain them a good mark, than a truthful account of their experience. Even so, this does not diminish the possibility of finding, through analysis, insights and

perceptions that may inform other similar co-production activities with people with learning difficulties.

The literary competence and presentation of some of the journals, made accurate understanding of events and the students' reflections difficult to assess, although general agreement between the journals could be found. As this study focuses on half of the student cohort, the data pool was limited and unable to generate theories that could be representative of the whole group. However, findings are representative of work undertaken by students at one particular site, the post-16 college in the winter of 2009.

6.0 Conclusion

Three core categories of context, student anxiety over time-constraint, and student satisfaction emerged from data found in 15 of 20 reflective journals analysed for this study. The perceptions of social care students in this study indicated that the context in which co-producing multimedia portfolios takes place, can act as a significant obstacle to achieving accessible platforms of communication with people with learning difficulties. The working practices of the institution need to be made explicit to students to facilitate their engagement with the learners in the multimedia project. It is apparent that communications between the numerous professionals who supervise and support the students could be improved. The salient implication emerging from the findings is a recommendation for environmental structures of a higher order, relating to time-tabling, organisation and communication.

Students' anxiety over time-constraint demonstrates that sufficient time should be allocated for this work, taking account of the high absence rates of pupils with

learning difficulties as well as the traits of learners, which include the rate at which the learner works. Planning which is informed by the acknowledgement of these difficulties would have served the project better.

The students' satisfaction highlights their professional development, their personal growth and enhanced knowledge, acquired through study prompted by their learners' difficulties and the positive links which they forged with the learners. Their improved understanding and experience of the communication needs of their learners, has inspired their creativity and fired their imagination to discover different ways of communicating with their learner. The students have explored touch, sound, colour, smell, taste and physical movement to elicit and stimulate communication in their learners. Many, although not all, of the co-produced portfolios are representative of the learners and will serve their self-advocacy.

The students have been afforded a unique opportunity to learn from and experience interaction with people with learning and communication difficulties. This experience has been supported and enhanced by the excellent resources and facilities of the Rix Centre. As one student enthused: 'The Rix Centre provided some fantastic pieces of hardware' to help his learner use the computer. The students have been evicted from their comfort zone of standard verbal communication and stereotype models of people with learning difficulties and placed in unfamiliar and challenging terrain. They are compelled to adjust their preconceptions and draw deep on their own resources of understanding and creativity to achieve a working relationship with their learners. Their journals chart this voyage of self-discovery and of positive change and development.

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