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## Reflections on writing in social work education and practice

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## **Reflections on writing in social work education and practice**

### **Introduction**

Writing is a central, although often overlooked, part of social work education and practice. Within education, students' learning and competence is assessed through writing while in practice, much of social work is conducted through and recorded in writing. Through identifying the importance of writing in social work, this chapter offers some reflections on the ways in which a more conscious awareness of the relationship between the author, their reader, the context in which writing takes place and the final text can improve 'practice' in its widest sense.

### **A bundle of skills or a social practice?**

Academic writing is at the heart of higher education, forming the primary medium through which students are assessed. In the context of a highly selective higher education system, the ability of students to convey their understanding through the medium of academic writing has been a basic expectation. Responses to demands to address the standard of academic writing in the UK to date have primarily been either in the form of remedial support for individual students focused through libraries or study support centres or where student need is perceived more broadly, through study support modules (Lea and Street, 2000; Lillis, 2001). Such support draws upon a 'skills deficit' model which relies upon students supplementing 'deficits' in writing skills via support offered through workbooks, toolkits,

electronic skills labs and teaching which focuses on teaching surface elements of written language such as punctuation and spelling. Social work education in the UK has taken a similarly skills based approach to writing in as far as competence in literacy (assessed through successful completion of GCSE or equivalent in English) has been built into the entry requirements for qualifying training.

There is an emerging body of research in the UK which is exploring academic and professional writing through drawing on a *social practices* approach to writing (Lillis, 2001; Lea and Stierer, 2000; Rai, 2004;2006). This approach moves away from limiting writing to a set of discrete acquirable skills and more towards viewing it as '*a communication process which is embedded in social contexts, interactions and relationships*' (Rai 2006) or an activity embedded in social and interpersonal ways of being (Bazerman, 1981; Bazerman, 1988; Lea and Stierer eds, 2000; Bazerman and Prior, 2004). The significance of this shift in emphasis is that it opens up the possibility of exploring writing in the social and interactional contexts in which it takes place. The purpose of the text, the author and the reader all become relevant in understanding how a particular piece of writing is created.

Within an academic context, for example, a social practices approach recognises the significance the diversity of writing requirements across disciplines and the extent to which academic writing is local to institutions, courses and even individual tutors. Whilst it may seem obvious that writing 'Physics' is different from 'writing social work', students can find it more difficult to understand why 'writing social work' differs from 'writing sociology' and, more perplexing, why

the expectations of 'writing social work' might differ between universities and individual tutors. These differences are common in higher education and arise in part from the belief or assumption that the academic essay is a commonly understood way of writing with clear or common sense 'rules'. In her research on student writing, Lillis (1997) suggests that student writing frequently labelled as an 'essay' can disguise complex expectations of students' writing. The essay, in fact, represents a very particular way of constructing knowledge which, whilst frequently presented as transparent, is both implicit and complex. Writing in social work commonly encompasses a range of assessed academic writing tasks including 'essays', reflective writing and portfolios alongside writing undertaken during field work<sup>1</sup> to assess practice competence. The writer's success in any task will rely significantly upon their understanding of the expectations of the course and assessor in each task.

### **Essay or reflective writing?**

It is common in social work education for students to be assessed through a combination of 'essays' and various forms of reflective writing such as reflective essays, journals or commentaries in portfolios. Although these are also considered to be academic writing, the expectations of how students present their ideas may be very different. One of the most significant differences is that in more reflective writing the author is expected to focus more on themselves in their writing, a process which can create tensions with some assumptions about how an academic essay should be constructed. An essay, for example, is typically expected to present evidence from authoritative sources (such as published books or journals) in order to build an objective, dispassionate

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<sup>1</sup> I use 'field work' here in place of 'practice' due to the potentially confusing multiple uses of the term practice.

argument. A piece of reflective writing may share all these expectations, but in addition the author is required to include subjective reflections on their own experience, values or practice as a key part of building an argument or reasoned position. There are also some linguistic challenges presented by some forms of reflective writing, such as making a judgement about the use of the first person singular pronoun (I). Although the acceptability of the use of 'I' has shifted in academia, its use remains questioned in an academic essay whilst being unavoidable in reflective writing, without the use of cumbersome linguistic techniques. A more significant issue, however, is the importance of the use of 'I' in enabling the author to use a personal voice in their writing in order to offer true reflective insights. The rules or expectations about specific writing tasks may differ, so it is important for a student writer to seek as much clarity as possible and for educators to ensure that guidance is explicit as unspoken assumptions can be unhelpful for writer and reader.

At undergraduate level, guidance is commonly provided at the level of university or faculty regulations and also at course level. At university / faculty level there may be common regulations about issues such as plagiarism and styles of referencing whilst at the individual course level more detailed guidance might be provided about expected content and perhaps style of writing or structure. It is where guidance addresses issues such as 'style' and 'structure' that there can be assumptions made about what the writer should take for granted as accepted conventions in academic writing where in fact no such common sense or uniform conventions necessarily exist between courses, faculties or universities.

Reflective writing in social work education provides a medium for students to demonstrate that they can offer a commentary on their practice; as such it is the

link between academic learning and field work. Where an 'essay' is a tool through which the student demonstrates his or her ability to comprehend and marshal theoretical knowledge into an argument or reasoned position, most reflective writing uses the same theoretical knowledge to evaluate justify practice. The inclusion of this added dimension, your own practice, makes reflective writing very challenging for many students. It requires the ability to précis an account of practice without slipping into lengthy description. It also requires the writer to demonstrate their understanding of theory by applying it critically to an evaluation of their own practice. Reflective writing can also be personally challenging where it requires the author to discuss their own values and beliefs, for example in relation to professional ethics. The thinking skills involved in reflective writing, therefore, provide a very good assessment of a student's ability to be a self-critical, evidence-based practitioner. Is there a link, however, between the writing skills used in an educational context and those used in the field?

### **Writing in field work**

Writing plays two key roles in social work practice. It is a method for recording what happens and it can also *be* what happens. Case note recording is primarily a space where factual events can be documented, but it is also a space where social workers can record their professional view and plan future action. Such records are vital not only as a statutory verification of practice but also as a method through which information can be shared with colleagues and monitored by supervisors or managers. As with academic writing, specific expectations of writing in practice are locally defined and so may vary from agency to agency or service to service. Writing, as all practice in social work, will be guided by

relevant legislation, policy and local good practice. Healy and Mulholland suggest that:

*Your institutional context shapes your writing practices in so far as it shapes both your professional purpose, and the expectations of the audiences for your writing. An understanding of the influence of the institutional context can enhance your credibility and effectiveness as a communicator.*

(Healy and Muholland, 2008:13)

Healy and Muholland continue by reminding social work writers that the conventions of writing can vary in terms of style, language and structure and that such conventions should be observed in order to maximise the effectiveness of writing. One very significant impact on writing in social work has been the introduction of electronic recording and the use of specific software for entering data, such in for assessment work. Such software prescribes to a very great degree the structure and style of writing, and to a lesser extent also prescribes the content. In contrast, where case recording allows 'free writing', or writing out with the constraints of specialised software, any constraints arise only from the expectations of the employing agency.

### **Determining expectations for effective writing**

In both academic and practice writing, there are four key factors to consider in order achieving effective writing:

- Audience
- Purpose
- Context
- Writer

### **Context**

Context can be loosely understood as incorporating 'audience' and 'purpose' discussed below. Context also relates to all factors which have an impact on the writer creating a text. These might range from the institutional constraints such as relevant rules and regulations to where the writing takes place. Imagine for yourself the difference in completing a piece of assessed writing on paper in examination conditions compared with writing at home on a computer, perhaps with the family in the background and interruptions such as the telephone. The environment itself can distract from the task but equally can stimulate ideas that feed into the content or style.

Similarly in the workplace, writing is constrained and directed by relevant legislations, policy and expectations. These might be fairly obvious, such as agency procedures on case recording but they might arise from workplace culture or practices. Paré (2000) suggests that students and newly qualified social workers pass through an apprenticeship into professional writing practices through which they are infused by the institutional and organisational ideologies of the practice environment. The kinds of cultural issues which might influence how case recording in the workplace might include the attitude of the social work staff towards the value of recording and how it is used both by colleagues and by senior staff or line managers. Where the writing is accepted as a valuable and constructive task it may receive more positive attention than if it is perceived as a tool for accountability or control. It is also important that the writing is perceived as relevant to the core role of delivering quality services rather than as a bureaucratic obstacle to 'getting on with the job'. There can also be very subtle influences on writing such as relationships between team members or between individual team members and their manager. Paré suggests that

students need to be assisted in becoming 'critically literate' (Paré 2004) in order to play a part in challenging established professional writing practices which might be ineffective or unhelpfully ideologically driven. He concluded that addressing change at an individual or even team level was unhelpful and that writing practices could most effectively be changed from within an organisation by challenging the workplace culture.

### **Audience**

The audience refers to the person or people who you are writing for. This can be more complex than it sounds as texts frequently have multiple audiences. A personal letter or an email may be written and addressed to a single individual with no intention that it should be shared more widely. In an academic or professional context, however, you are frequently writing for multiple and / or unknown audiences. A piece of assessed writing may be written with the knowledge that the primary audience is the tutor who will assess it. However, academic conventions would not encourage a conversational style in which a student writer addressed a known tutor personally. Northedge (2005) suggests that students should write for an anonymous *intelligent person in the street* (2005:275) or in other words that although the reality is their work will be read by a known individual who has specialist knowledge of the topic, the text should be constructed as if it was to be read by an interested, intelligent outsider. For the author, the implication is that the audience to some degree is an imaginary one and that an element of role playing is needed in order to write an essay which meets the expected conventions.

In a practice context audience involves less role playing, but is no less of a challenge due to the extensive number of audiences. For a piece of case recording the potential audiences could include:

- Social work colleagues
- Non social work colleagues
- Line manger
- Service user
- Service users family or advocate
- Police
- Solicitors / barristers / judge
- Auditors

Each of these audiences may read the recording from a different perspective and with different levels of understanding or knowledge and with different purposes. A good example of recording, therefore, should be written in such a way as to address its key functions in relation to each audience. Effective case recording should, therefore, be written in language accessible to all audiences, where it is reporting on events where different views were expressed, each should be noted alongside who expressed them and, perhaps most importantly, the professional view of the author should be included, ideally alongside theoretical or legal justifications. It is here that reflective writing and practice writing can be seen to re-connect, through the demonstration of critical evidence-based practice.

## **Purpose**

'Purpose' in relation to academic writing may seem obvious – to demonstrate academic competence. Essentially this is the case, and a careful observance by the author that s/he has met the assignment brief and learning outcomes. In many academic institutions assignments (the research in preparation and the feedback on them) are intended to constitute a key part of the students learning. Professional courses, such as social work, have the added dimension

of assessing professional competence and suitability. The consequence of this is that, although it is unlikely that an assessment would meet the learning outcomes well and contravene good or ethical practice, this kind of dichotomy is theoretically possible. Student writers in social work, therefore, need to be aware of the dual purpose of assessing academic understanding and skill alongside judging professional competence and suitability.

In a practice context, the purpose of a text is often prescribed through the procedures into which it falls, for example an assessment or a review document. Even within these parameters it is worth an author considering the wider purpose of a document. Returning to the case recording, the purposes could potentially include documenting events:

- As a statutory record of services provided or interventions made
- As a planning or assessment tool for current or future workers
- As evidence for legal teams (for or against the agency)
- To enable transparency for service users or their advocates offered access to records
- To enable accountability on behalf of individual workers and the agency

This range of purposes for one document illustrates the challenge for social workers in carrying out what might appear a very routine task.

## **Writer**

The final issue to consider is yourself, the writer, and your own relationship with writing. This may appear to be a rather odd issue to consider, but it is possibly the most important. Each of us has travelled an individual road to literacy which will have included our own language and educational histories. For some of us our language history is very simple and involves (in the UK) learning English as a first language as an infant which we continue to use throughout adult life and

which forms the basis of developing literacy skills. For many, however, this first language differs to a greater or lesser extent from the standard English required in academic or professional writing. This may be because we speak a non standard variety of English (some might refer to this as a dialect) or because English is a first, second or even third language. Even for speakers of English as a first language there is a process of familiarisation to move from spoken to academic or professional writing. For those with a more complex and challenging journey to travel from spoken to written language, there may be many emotive and practical hurdles to face when engaging in complex writing tasks. Similarly, each writer will have developed literacy skills in varied educational context, some of which will have been creative, supportive and rewarding whilst others have involved criticism, de-motivation and even discrimination. These personal journeys to becoming a writer remain relevant for student and professional writers and the interplay between these personal journeys and the more immediate issues of audience, purpose and context can have a significant influence on the success of a text.

## **Conclusion**

Social workers are familiar with the need to consider a wide range of issues in planning effective communication. Their professional training prepares them for thinking about the communication needs of the people they are working with in terms of meta-communication and the influence of the environment and task. It would also be a familiar approach to consider the relevant interpersonal issues which may impact upon an exchange of face to face communication. Such a holistic consideration of effective communication practice, incorporating the social and physical environment as well as the interpersonal is equally relevant

to writing. Developing the ability to write effectively in the context of social work does not rely upon learning a new set of skills; it relies upon the ability to transfer the skills of critically reflective social work practice to writing.

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### **Further Reading**

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