Writing in contemporary social work: 
texts, trajectories and technologies

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Aims of presentation

1. To give an overview of the WiSP project - *Writing in professional social work practice in a changing communicative landscape*

2. To offer a characterisation of the nature of writing in social work
   - Focus on texts
   - Focus on trajectories

3. Conclusions to date
   - About social work writing
   - About how we research professional writing
About WiSP

- 2.5 year, ESRC-funded research project (October 2015- April 2018)
- the first national research project on writing in professional social work practice

Research Questions

- What are the institutional writing demands in contemporary social work?
- What are the writing practices and perspectives of professional social workers?
- What are the challenges faced and solutions found?
- How are writing demands and practices shaping the nature of professional social work?

Builds on existing work:

- writing/literacies research (e.g. Barton and Hamilton; Barton and Papen; Lillis; Street),
- everyday workplace literacies research (e.g. Brandt; Tusting; Smith)
- management/recording systems and practices in social work (e.g. White et al; Huuskonen and Vakkari; Taylor)
- professional discourse studies- oral (e.g. Roberts & Sarangi; Sarangi)
- research on writing in social work (e.g. Pare; Rai and Lillis)
Why is this project important?

The production and use of written texts (often referred to as *paperwork, recording, inputting* or *documenting*) is a high stakes activity in professional social work.

Writing...

- plays a central role in all decisions about services for people
- is used to evaluate social workers’ professional competence
- is often criticised – in public reviews and media reporting of high profile cases

Yet there is little systematic research on contemporary writing/recording demands, genres and practices....
Our overarching epistemological orientation to ethnography has to do with the ontology, the definition, of language itself. There is no way in which language can be 'context-less' in this anthropological tradition in ethnography. To language, there is always a particular function, a concrete shape, a specific mode of operation, and an identifiable set of relations between singular acts of language and wider patterns of resources and their functions. (Blommaert, 2006, p. 4)

Involves using context sensitive data collection methods and analysis in order to respond to research questions… A range of data including interviews, observations, texts (case notes, emails, notes…), documentary data. A range of analyses… text, genre, discourse, practice, trajectory, genre suites and chains, content, corpus linguistics…

Day 1

8 am (had worked 5 hrs on report at home on Sunday)

Office 1: Working on writing parental assessment. Reading and typing on laptop, by side of laptop on desk

Continues to work on report

[Loud conversations going on, face to face and on phone whilst she is writing]

9.15

9.20

9.30

9.40

9.47

9.56

10.05

9.15

Continues to work on report

Looking at calendar on screen

Writing emails

Goes to other side of office to talk to manager

Headphones on, new phone call, talking on phone

Reading word doc whilst on phone- a tabulated schedule for contact sessions (between carers and children to be observed by sw)

Writing email whilst continuing same call on phone

Travels by car 5 mins to a school nearby for a core group meeting. To discuss the behaviour and welfare of three siblings, aged 10, 11, 12 all at different schools.

SW chairs meeting

Had hard copy care plan in front of her on desk (printed from IT system)

Has hardback notebook and hard copy diary

She makes notes in hard copy note book, on her to do list template, on the hard copy care plan during discussions.
Data collection almost complete, August 2017

• 5 agencies participating [*between 4-12 months to establish access, participation along a ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ continuum*]
• 65 social worker interviews
• 10 weeks of researcher observations
• 481 days of social worker writing activity logs
• 4,517 texts collected and anonymised, over 1.2 million words of written discourse

Still to do
• *carry out screen capture of small amount of social worker at-desk writing*
Characterising writing in professional social work - focus on texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text type</th>
<th>Number of texts</th>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>Raw</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case notes</td>
<td>2,595</td>
<td>444,337</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>1,536</td>
<td>114,621</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Formal reports and assessments</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>596,229</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (internal admin e.g. casefile audit form, training application)</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>77,862</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>4,517</td>
<td>1,233,049</td>
<td>100</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Case notes: 36%
- Emails: 9%
- Formal reports and assessments: 48%
- Other: 6%
Email content:

Hello [FA1],

Please ignore the previous blank one!

Please see below – relates to PIN [NUMBER]. I agreed with [EST1] that their support would end as of 22/1/2016, thereby ending the Direct Payment arrangement too.

Is this enough information for you to end the service as it is? There will then be further charges on the way as [COUNCIL2] are assessing and commissioning service, which [COUNCIL2] will be paying for under their s.117 responsibilities. Is it somehow possible to keep the Direct Payment ‘open’ pending this?

Hope this makes sense.

Thanks again,

[SW005] (Social Worker, [LOCATION] Mental Health Team).
Using corpus linguistics to explore the discourse of social work writing - example of case notes

Core 'business' of social work: visit, care, worker, children, support, concerns, assessment, placement

Female: she, her, mum, mother

Places: home, school

Arrangements: # (all numbers), regarding

Past tense reporting verbs: stated, advised, agreed, discussed
and be civil for the children's sake. [PERSON2] stated [PERSON4] is happy to have contact with

] stated it was her that thought of this. [PERSON2] stated her and [PERSON1] are not in a relationship
together would be positive for the children. [PERSON2] stated it was her that thought of this. [PERSON2]
she saw him yesterday at contact. [PERSON2] stated that she feels [PERSON1]'s mental health is
to deal with this immediately Feedback from [FC] [FC] stated that everything was fine, [CHILD] is co-operative
want this to be confusing for the children. [PERSON2] stated she suggested this to [PERSON1] and he 'kicked
and [PERSON1] was asleep in her buggy and [SU] stated that she was having her nap. [SU] was dressed
] and [PERSON8]'s cannabis use. [PERSON2] stated she knew about their cannabis use and tried to
We collected [PERSON1] from the home, [PERSON1] stated she didn't tell [PERSON2] until the last minute
letter. Contact [PERSON5] and [PERSON4]. [PERSON5] stated that the family was registered
back there again later today at around 7.30pm." I advised that I would let [PERSON] and [PERSON]
her phone, so letter sent out today. [PERSON] advised that the worker is not in today, but will
Characterising writing in professional social work - focus on trajectories (example - ‘dementia’ case)

1. Where writing figures in daily work trajectories

2. The clusters of texts - ‘genre suites’ - related to a case at a particular moment in time

3. The relationship between texts - intertextuality/recontextualisation of specific texts/bits of texts and how texts drive action

4. Social worker perspectives on writing and entextualisation...
Writing across the week, by SW, foregrounding ‘dementia’ case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>DAY 1</th>
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<th>DAY 3</th>
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**Case note** of message from out of hours

**Case notes** of two home visits and one further attempted visit

**Written documents related to ‘dementia’ case during week of observation**

**Handwritten** notes of phone calls with
- apartment block,
- client’s son and daughter in law,
- mental health,
- GP surgery and GP,
- residential homes,
- business services,
- respite care home

**Short term care, online form**

Time across the working day (9am-6pm)
Conclusions to date about characterisation of social work writing...

• A huge amount of writing is going on using a range of technologies...

• A considerable amount of writing is required institutionally to drive action (e.g. secure services...)

• Range of institutional genres and diversity within genres and specific texts...

• Complexity of production of some key assessment genres to deadlines...

• Raises questions about how written records are/should be ‘evaluated’...

• WiSP should enable a better understanding of social work writing where writing is often framed as transparent recording of events (see Taylor 2008)
Conclusions to date about how we research professional writing...

• Need for context sensitive multiple methods
• Need for focus on writing trajectories – writing within work trajectories (deadlines, specific texts, specific order, alongside other work), relationship between texts, specific instances of entextualisation
• Challenges of working with existing frames of reference around writing- notably ‘texts’, ‘genres’- institutional and academic labelling. If we adopt ‘genre’ as ‘action’ (Miller) then the cluster = ‘genre’
• Challenges of working with notions of typicality and variation- what’s at stake in terms of what we can come to know and in terms of informing practice?
Thank you

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