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Writing in professional social work practice in a changing communicative landscape (WISP)

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Impact Objectives

- Investigate the role of written communication in the domain of social work, and highlight the extent to which institutional recording policies, systems and technologies are 'fit for purpose'
- Explore the challenges faced by social workers in recording complex life histories and situations in order to provide high quality support to vulnerable members of society
- Provide an archive of material to support student and trainee social workers towards becoming confident writers across a range of genres



The importance of the written word

*Professor Theresa Lillis (pictured), Maria Leedham and Alison Twiner are carrying out the first national project on writing and recording in social work: **WiSP – Writing in professional social work practice in a changing communicative landscape**. Alongside the project advisory panel, chaired by **Lucy Gray**, they are working to ensure findings can be used for informing education and training, as well as professional and institutional policy making*



Can you describe the drivers behind this research?

The research initially arose in response to a local authority requesting guidance and support for their social workers surrounding the production of high quality case notes. This led to a critical exploration of the amount of writing going on and the challenges that social workers face to produce complex documents, often within very short timeframes, and a decision to carry out a larger study on the nature of recording currently required.

How are you managing client privacy coupled with a need to allow access to data?

This is a really difficult area and we have worked with the five participating authorities to ensure the anonymity of social workers, agencies and clients/citizens using the services. All data are anonymised before they leave the local authorities' sites and systems. Anonymisation includes not only

the removal of all personal information, but also places, times and details that might identify the client/citizen.

As a publicly-funded project we are required to make our data available for future use by other researchers. In preparing data for archiving with the UK Data Service, we are building further layers of anonymisation, such as the disarticulation of written documents (already anonymised) from any specific social workers (already anonymised).

You are working with five local authorities in the UK – what role do they play and what expertise do they bring to the research?

With all, we have gone through university and local authority ethics and governance procedures, and with some authorities, additionally drawn up data sharing agreements.

The authorities are participating in different ways depending on what they consider to be least disruptive or potentially most beneficial to their services. Authorities are

participating along a continuum of what we can describe as 'thick and thin', with some allowing us to collect a large range of different types of data, for example texts, interviews and observations, and some giving permission for interviews only. We are collecting data in relation to children, adults and mental health services. Central to the research are the perspectives of social workers whose insights and understandings are at the heart of the WiSP project.

Are you able to share any results so far?

I am pleased, and to a great extent overwhelmed, that in the most difficult circumstances – a huge increase in overall workload, massive cuts in local authority funding, a profession often under attack by the public media – that five local authorities have decided to take part. From the analysis so far, what I would say is that I am troubled by the huge amount of writing that social workers are required to do and the impact of such writing demands on their work overall.

The complexity of effective communication

The need to be able to communicate effectively in writing is an essential part of a profession such as social work, where assessments of need and provision of services to vulnerable people are made on the basis of written records. However, the complexity of the writing required is underestimated. The WiSP project aims to make visible this complexity and push forward debates about policies governing social work writing and recording

Much of the process of social work is about collecting, analysing, disseminating and recording data. Social work typically requires the individual to conduct interviews and observations with both individuals and groups, review evolving situations and needs, sustain interactions with a wide range of other professionals and make records of all such work across a range of documents via large ICT systems.

Often dealing with distressing social situations, social workers are required to provide accurate and detailed records which have a major impact on people's lives (for example, decisions about whether a child is taken into care, an adult is detained under the Mental Health Act, an elderly person receives support to live at home) and which may come under legal scrutiny. Furthermore, notes and reports are produced during what can be harrowing and highly complex situations and under the pressure of meeting specific deadlines. Research on writing in general shows that drafting and redrafting is an essential part of producing high quality texts, but in social work there is rarely time for such processes. Tracking in detail the writing demands, the extent to which available technologies aid or hinder writing, and the specific ways in which social workers manage their writing in the context of heavy and complex caseloads is the goal of the WiSP (Writing in professional social work practice in a changing communicative landscape) project.

SOCIAL WORK RECORDING

The WiSP project was developed by Professor Theresa Lillis from The Open University and builds on existing research with Lucy Gray and a longstanding tradition at The Open University for researching language and

written communication. For more information on The Open University's Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology (CREET) see: www.open.ac.uk/creet/.

Lillis acknowledges that writing is not the primary function of social services, but merely a necessary part of the process. However, making visible the amount of time that writing is taking up is important, as it raises fundamental questions about what social work currently is and expectations about what social workers can (or should) do.

An important aim of the project is to document and analyse the range of written work produced by social workers using an integrated language methodology composed of ethnography, corpus linguistics and screen capture technology. Using these tools, the WiSP team hope to determine several parameters, including quantifying the amount of written work produced, the actual types of writing carried out, and how writing is managed alongside other essential work. The information gained will help identify the spread of work across the working day and produce the first detailed roadmap of the writing carried out by social workers.

INCREASING WRITING, DECREASING IMPACT?

Social services in the UK are facing an ever-increasing demand for their time and effort in the context of a reduction in resource. A growing client base, added to the complexity of cases and the need to ensure all aspects are correctly and fully recorded, means staff need to generate increasing amounts of 'paperwork'. A repeated axiom across institutions is that 'if something isn't written down, it didn't happen'. The written record

has become paramount in accounting for all areas of practice.

Since social services deal with many different areas of social need, and find themselves in many frontline situations, the need to ensure that accurate records are kept is essential. Initial investigations have uncovered that social workers can spend much of their day engaged in writing tasks, and an analysis of 117 days' work has identified that as much as 87 per cent of their time is taken up with writing. Clearly writing forms a necessary part of everyday tasks, but there are concerns that it is becoming a distraction from the frontline contact that is expected of such professionals, and may curtail their overall effectiveness.

QUANTIFYING THE PROBLEM

This realisation that so much of a social worker's time is spent writing compared with spending time face-to-face with clients/citizens who need the service, has prompted the WiSP project to investigate further. The project aims to both investigate the role of writing in a professional domain, and highlight the significance of written communication in the specific arena of social work.

The issue arose from a request from a local authority for guidance and support for their social workers to produce high quality case notes. This led to an appreciation of the actual scale of written work expected of social workers and that the amount and range of writing were not well understood or even acknowledged throughout the institutional structures. The first stage therefore, is the unpacking of what Lillis calls the 'bureaucratic ideal', by paying careful attention to what kinds of writing



I am troubled by the huge amount of writing that social workers are required to do and the impact of such demands on their work overall. I would like to think that we could help establish a debate amongst key stakeholders about how writing/the written record helps or hinders this important work

are being undertaken and how much time is being spent on the actual act of written communication.

The project is just completing data collection and has carried out 70 interviews across five authorities, collected more than 4500 texts (which amounts to more than a million words) – case notes, assessments, reports, emails – and carried out 10 weeks of observation of social worker practice. Currently, many social workers feel they spend too much time writing, but there is no accurate measure of how much time is actually spent on writing. The WiSP project seeks to redress this.

SHARPER AND FLEXIBLE TECHNOLOGIES

Using an integrated language methodology designed to analyse the use of language in real-world situations, Lillis is confident WiSP will provide a detailed study of the current state of social work writing, in terms of the amount and the contextual level in which it is being used. There is little explicit reference to writing in the current guidance for education and training of social workers and in the professions' standards set out by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). One consequence is that there is little consistency across qualifying programmes in training or preparation for new social workers, and professional writing can be overlooked in a demanding curriculum. Social workers therefore often have to learn how to manage



Theresa Lillis (Principal Investigator), Alison Twiner (Research Associate), Maria Leedham (Co-Investigator), Lucy Gray (Advisory Panel Chair)

writing demands 'on the job'. Lillis believes this is to the detriment of the profession, and while it may not be possible to immediately reduce the amount of overall recording required, it is possible to provide prospective social workers with essential information and support about the writing they will be required to undertake.

A key focus for future development are the technologies used for writing. Large ICT systems are used in all social worker agencies and should ideally help reduce the amount of time required, but there are concerns that the templates generated via such systems are clunky and repetitive and that the systems are not powerful enough, leading to the slowing of workflow. The WiSP project aims to identify which technologies are in use and which are helping or hindering social workers' writing.

The two-year project is due for completion in April 2018 and Lillis and her team will report on their findings then.

Project Insights

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COLLABORATORS

WiSP Research Team

Theresa Lillis (Principal Investigator) • Maria Leedham (Co-investigator) • Alison Twiner (Research Associate)

WiSP Impact Advisory Panel

Lucy Gray, Chair • Ruth Allen, Chief Executive, British Association of Social Work (BASW) • Elaine Buckley, Chair, Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) • Kate Cuthbert, Academic Lead for Health and Social Care, Higher Education Academy (HEA) • Ann Flynn, Localities Lead, Health, Wellbeing and Social Care, The Open University • Janet Melville-Wiseman, Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (JUCSWEC) • Mick Wilson, UNISON • Social worker representatives from local authorities • Learning and development representatives from local authorities

CONTACT

Professor Theresa Lillis
Principal Investigator

T: +44 1908 652375
E: Theresa.Lillis@open.ac.uk
W: www.writinginsocialwork.com

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR BIO

Theresa Lillis is Professor of English Language and Applied Linguistics at The Open University UK. She has been researching writing in everyday, academic, professional and workplace domains for more than 20 years and has published numerous books, articles and practical guides. She is interested in the role writing plays in all aspects of our lives, the ways in which writing (via conventional and digital technologies) provides or constrains citizens' access to key areas of social life (education, health, social care, politics) and the specific ways in which what counts as 'writing' is changing.



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