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**Involving co-educators in social work education in the context of Covid-19: Reflections on challenges and potential solutions**

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## **Abstract**

This paper provides a reflexive account of some of the challenges that are arising with the involvement of service users and carers (co-educators) in social work education within the context of Covid-19. As Higher Education Institutions shift to primarily delivering social work education online, this has a knock on impact for the involvement of co-educators and this is the focus of the paper. The paper focuses on two key challenges being experienced; access to and use of technology, and the difficulties of creating safe and meaningful spaces online. The authors offer a discussion of these challenges and present some potential solutions that can be adopted to continue to support co-educators within social work education.

## **Keywords**

Service user and carer involvement; social work education; co-educators; digital inequality, participation; online working.

# **Involving co-educators in social work education in the context of Covid-19: Reflections on challenges and potential solutions**

## **Introduction**

The benefits of involving service users and carers, or co-educators<sup>1</sup> in social work education are multiple and well documented (e.g. Grey & Webb, 2013; Morley, 2015). In addition, it is a *requirement* of social work education in the UK that students are able to learn from the experiences of those who have had social work intervention in their lives (SCIE, 2009). Those who have their own lived experience with social work contribute to course design, delivery and development activities, as well as to admissions processes. Such involvement has been demonstrated to be valuable for students in a multitude of ways including, for example, in helping them to develop a critical and reflexive understanding of their profession (Grey & Webb, 2013; Lambert et al., 2020). Whilst the literature on this topic has often focused on the principles underlying this work and the value for students, how involvement is undertaken and the practicalities and challenges associated with this work is less explored. This, coupled with the additional challenges raised by Covid-19 and the associated 'lockdown' measures, means that there is an increased need to examine how we can continue to engage in meaningful involvement when our usual ways of doing so have been so seriously disrupted. This paper seeks to address that gap by providing a reflexive account of some of the challenges that are arising in this area of work as a result of changes to HEI provision brought about by Covid-19. Most notably, Covid-19 has resulted in a shift from face to face teaching to a hybrid model where most delivery is online, rather than in classroom settings. This presents a number of challenges for working with co-educators and this is the focus of the paper. The paper is not intended to be an exhaustive overview of the aspects we need to consider, but rather offers some opening discussion of the challenges that we may face and some possible ways of counteracting these. The authors have extensive experience related to the involvement of co-educators (or Experts by Experience/ EbE) in social work education (as educators through virtue of academic or lived experience). We have drawn on this experience to reflect on two aspects that we consider to be the key challenges: access to and use of technology, and creating safe spaces for meaningful discussion online.

## **Access to and use of technology**

Covid-19 has highlighted the digital inequalities that exist in our society (Beunoyer et al., 2020) and the Higher Education sector has not been immune to this with issues arising for staff and students alike with the move to online teaching (Malcolm, 2020). Beunoyer et al. (2020) define digital inequalities as "emerging from the differences in actual access to technology, as well as differences in digital literacy" (p. 1). Debates have arisen already about

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the term 'co-educators' in recognition of the contested nature of the term 'service user'. This is the preferred term of those people who are involved in social work education through virtue of their lived experience at the authors' HEI.

digital inequalities in HEI with discussions about what online teaching means for students (e.g. Malcolm, 2020). The move to online teaching raises some specific challenges in relation to the access and use of technology that will now be required in order to engage in social work education. As Dey (2020) (cited by Malcolm, 2020) stated, “virtual is not inherently inclusive and equitable for all workers and learners”. For many co-educators these challenges will be minimal or non-existent, but for others this could present a barrier to involvement. Whilst we have found that most co-educators have access to the technology now required to be involved, for some people access to technology represents a significant obstacle. HEIs need to consider how they can ensure that educators and students alike have access to the technology they need to connect and engage in online learning spaces. This should be considered in the re-opening of libraries and on campus spaces where access to technology and internet use is possible. Even where the technology is available at home, other issues such as internet speed and quality of equipment may pose problems for some people (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

Varying levels of digital literacy also create issues when working online. We know that there are different levels of comfort with the use of the different software required; a ‘try and try again’ approach has worked in enabling our group to work together, but more work needs to be done to support those who do not have the digital skills needed to fully engage online. We should see this as an opportunity to learn from each other; differing levels of digital literacy exist across all educators in HEI. However, full time employed academics have access to the technology, training, and IT support required to learn how to use the new systems. For co-educators, who are not usually formally employed by the university, access to such support is often not available. All educators should have access to tutorials and support to help them develop the skills that they need to connect online. This was also supported by Beaunoyer et al. (2020, p. 3) who commented on the importance of having “assistance [...] from more experienced internet users” in order to develop digital skills. This should also include increasing knowledge and understanding about areas such as privacy and online safety. This may be particularly pertinent for some people, for example, people with a learning disability are more likely to experience challenges in access to and use of technology (Lussier-Desrochers et al., 2017). This may be partially linked to the perception that internet use poses greater risks for those with a learning disability (Chadwick et al., 2017).

The move to online working also strengthens the argument that co-educators should be formally recognised as equal partners within teaching teams (Brown & Young, 2008; Lonbay et al., 2020). Such formal recognition would ensure access to the support and training needed to teach online. We also know that when we connect online it is not always a ‘smooth’ process. For some people, connecting online can be anxiety provoking and this needs to be acknowledged. Connections get dropped, people are interrupted; life is continuing within our work spaces. We need to increase our empathy when we work online. Working in this way can mean sharing parts of your life that you would not normally share, for example, the physical space that you live in or the people that you live with. For co-educators this can feel invasive; a social worker will often see into people’s homes, but other educators and students usually do not. This may feel uncomfortable for some people and we should be mindful of maintaining privacy when planning activities, for example, ensuring that we ask people

whether they want to have a camera turned on, giving them the choice to participate, showing how to use a background screen, and accepting and acknowledging chaos and interruptions.

### **Creating safe spaces for meaningful discussion**

Creating safe spaces for engagement online is a crucial aspect to be considered in the move to digital teaching. Safe spaces (within this context) are those where people feel comfortable and supported to discuss and share their experiences, to talk about how they feel and share emotions, and to contribute to conversations about how to continue to develop meaningful involvement and support each other through difficult times. We have found that the core aspects of successful and meaningful involvement by co-educators in social work education are linked to people feeling like a valued part of the teaching team (Lonbay et al., 2020). Good communication and the spaces for this to happen supports the development of this feeling and the connected relationships (ibid). We are also aware that the formal and informal support before, during, and after engagement is crucial for some people to feel safe and able to share what are often very difficult experiences (ibid). As Carello & Butler (2015) have pointed out, sharing and discussing adverse life events can risk vicarious trauma for those involved, whether they be educators or students. In the normal course of a semester, opportunities for support would be both planned and spontaneous; as part of one team we get to know each other and spot when things may not be feeling okay for someone, or we may have planned in specific times to debrief after teaching sessions. With a move to a predominantly online model there is a need to re-examine how we work with co-educators in a way that recognises the importance of trauma awareness and helps to develop supportive relationships.

The formation of supportive relationships is also a core aspect of social work practice itself and the values and ideas underpinning relationship-based practice are useful in framing this work too. Ingram & Smith (2018), for example, highlighted relationship-based practice as requiring social workers to be aware of the “emotional world” of the person with whom they are working and to also be aware of the contextual factors which may impact them (p.7). This is equally important for us to consider within the current context for involving people in social work education. People can become anxious and unsafe when their environment changes. Add to that a global pandemic and the impact can manifest itself into PTSD or depression in severe cases (Perrin et al., 2020). People are juggling a multitude of challenges that Covid-19 has raised, for example, access to food and other resources, supporting others, and managing the stress of long term isolation. Additionally, some of the co-educators we work with have underlying mental and/or physical health issues and are in fact shielding to protect themselves or if caring for others classed as being within the high risk categories. There is emerging evidence that Covid-19 is contributing to more adverse consequences for those with pre-existing mental health issues and co-educators have shared with us that this large scale quarantine and long term social isolation has impacted on their usual support networks and access to services, including mental health services (Asmundson et al., 2020; Rubin & Wessely, 2020). Within this, we are asking them to share their sensitive

and often traumatic life experiences within the online learning environment without these or additional support networks. Evidence of this was reflected in recent online virtual interviews with students where there was an increase in co-educators talking about anxiety and mental health issues rather than usual scenarios of physical health and issues of disability and access to services which they have historically shared in such activities. In normal circumstances we would be afforded time and a safe space for debrief and reflection on what has been discussed to ensure that people feel safe and protected, and we must be mindful to replicate this even if in a virtual setting.

It is a given that as academics we have a responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our students and for that matter our colleagues. We should also have a responsibility to support our co-educators. However, how we do this is difficult as we cannot signpost them to student wellbeing services nor to occupational health as we would for the aforementioned groups of people. This again supports the argument that we should ensure that co-educators are formally recognised as part of our teaching teams. We need to be encouraging practical steps to manage self-care during these difficult times, including ways to maintain social connectedness and preventing social isolation which is imperative (Usher, Bhullar, et al., 2020; Usher, Durkin, et al., 2020). To help with this we should ensure that we have regular contact with each other so that we are all able to keep informed, updated, and prepared for involvement. Regular contact can also help us to ascertain people's views about the move to online teaching. Having open and honest discussions about our circumstances is important. Use of self was also highlighted by Imgram & Smith (2018) as important in the development of relationships and is crucial within this context also; we all need to be open and honest about how we are feeling. Only expecting this from some people within this context will only serve to reinforce unhelpful power dynamics. In order to do this, we need safe spaces within which meaningful dialogue can take place and the extra time required for this to take place. This can happen either within a group or within a one to one session. These conversations should also consider the wider aspects and issues upon our communities and society as a whole due to Covid 19.

There are a number of practical steps that we can take to create supportive spaces online. These include acknowledging and building in the additional time required to have conversations with people and build supportive relationships. How we invite people into these spaces is important; as Walker, (2019, p.22) highlighted, the "more welcoming, collaborative and open" the invite, the more "ownership and empowerment" was felt within the space. We should actively recognise that people are trying to survive and cope through these altered times. This means slowing down sometimes and giving time to pause, for example, we can reduce our agendas so that we have extra time to connect and for people to talk about how they feel. Raising awareness of what is necessary and unnecessary information and signposting to credible advice and guidance sources to prevent increased anxiety, loss of control, and alleviate fear and uncertainty will also be helpful (Johal, 2009). We also need to be mindful of the need to facilitate opportunities for peer support to maintain the relationships co-educators have built between themselves over the years. Gone is the opportunity to meet for a coffee and a catch up prior to or after formal meetings or teaching sessions. However, we can build this into the sessions, acknowledge that this is an

integral part of involvement, and even provide payment for such an activity rather than people having to do this in their own time.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed some of the key challenges that we may face when working with co-educators in online spaces. Digital inequalities were outlined as a key barrier to online teaching. Recognition of such inequalities reinforces the need for co-educators to be recognised as formal members of the teaching team which would allow access to training and resources to support their involvement. Additional anxieties that may be provoked through both the current situation and the use of online platforms to engage (which may feel very invasive for some people) were also discussed. These highlight the importance of creating safe spaces for meaningful discussion where open and honest conversations can take place. It is crucial that we facilitate opportunities for these conversations and to support people to connect with each other and continue to develop relationships. This means, for example, building in extra time and opportunities for online meetings and connecting with people in smaller groups or one to one to ensure opportunities to talk openly are created. These conversations should include discussion with people about what factors they feel are important in the creation of safe online spaces; what this looks like should be considered and decided upon together. Clear guidance should also be available on how to connect and work online, as well as on what support is available for people. Within this, it is also important to not lose sight of other ways of supporting people to contribute, for example, writing and visual arts. We still need to support and provide the resources needed for this to happen. It is also important to acknowledge some of the positive aspects of the move to online teaching, for example, reduced travel time and an opportunity to develop digital skills which may be beneficial in the future. It has also been commented upon that the move to online connections has made the world more accessible for some people (e.g. Ryan, 2020).

Through this paper, the authors hope to invite reflection and discussion on how we can improve things moving forward and ensure that the move to online teaching does not disadvantage co-educators and reduce their opportunities for involvement. We know that many people are focused on their day to day survival at the moment; asking what people need will be an important first step. Conversations about how to create equitable and safe spaces on line will also be crucial moving forward. This should include not only conversations about how we can reduce digital inequality, but also a consideration of the aspects that are important for involvement under 'usual' circumstances. It is more important than ever to ensure that we do not leave people feeling disempowered. We need to consider how we create these 'safe' online spaces together, where all of those involved feel a sense of ownership. Working in this way will benefit us all.



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