

## **An evaluation of a collaborative experiential learning model to develop communication skills in role play practice.**

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### **Research Domains**

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### **Abstract**

This research paper reports findings of a research project aimed to evaluate the experiences of British social work students in a collaborative experiential learning model. A qualitative survey (n=35) gathered views on the use of groupwork to develop communication skills through role play practice supported by reflection and peer and professional feedback across eight weeks. Research participants reported the development of communication skills, but also peer relationships, reflective skills, planning skills, knowledge, confidence, groupwork skills and ability to give and receive feedback. This was enabled by a positive working group, formed by a supportive role for each other, a non-judgemental attitude, and participation and engagement.

The paper will present the pedagogical model and explore research participants' experiences of the model to enhance application of role play practice in use in academic practice. It will provide recommendations for use in academic practice.

### **Full paper**

This research paper reports findings of a research project aimed to evaluate the experiences of British social work students in a collaborative experiential learning model undertaken across eight weeks where each week, teaching was followed by role-play practice where a group of students practiced role-play to each other using provided scenarios. The students provided peer feedback which was supplemented with feedback from teaching staff, a person with lived experience or a qualified social worker and it was videoed, all enabling reflection on practice by the students between sessions.

Role-play is a pedagogical method used across a number of university-based courses, particularly in professional courses, that offers depth of learning (Delnavaz et al, 2018, Hidayati and Pardjono, 2018) as it facilitates authenticity (Tufford et al, 2018, Fulton et al,

2019) without placing people with lived experience of risk from early skill development by practicing novice students (Kourgiantakis et al, 2020, Kim et al, 2021, Meny et al, 2023).

Role-play has been found to develop communication skills (Beckmann and Mahanty, 2016, Hidayati and Pardjono, 2018, Fulton et al, 2019, Banach et al, 2020, Kim et al, 2021, Meny et al, 2023, Skoura-Kirk et al, 2021), decision making skills (Beckmann and Mahanty, 2016), groupwork skills (Hidayati and Pardjono, 2018), relationship-building skills (Tufford et al, 2018, Tufford et al, 2021, Skoura-Kirk et al, 2021), enhanced confidence and awareness of self (Fulton et al, 2019, Sewell et al, 2021, Allemang et al, 2022) and the ability to apply theory to practice (Delnavaz et al, 2018, Skoura-Kirk et al, 2021). However, the value of role-play is accentuated where there is both reflection during role-play and after role-play (Occhiuto et al, 2024), arguably applying Schon's (1983) reflection in and on action.

The research, which had local ethical approval, was undertaken through an online survey of n= 35 social work students and apprentice and thematically data analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006), where the themes of engagement with learning, collaborative experiential learning and factors that impacted learning were identified. This research paper focuses on the evaluation of the collaborative experiential learning from group-based role play practice.

Interestingly, no research participants reflected on the lectures in the morning as a link to develop knowledge that could be applied to practice. Instead research participants reflected that their learning was applied through a number of key tasks, including collaborative learning, feedback, reflection and watching the recording of self back after the role-play practice. Research participants reflected on how small group role-play practice enhanced their communication skills by both practicing themselves and watching other students try different methods, enhancing the variety and depth of skill development that took place as they were "able to learn from other people and share my own knowledge and skill with the team".

Practice and observation of role-play scenarios "this was a complete game changer", was enhanced by the feedback received from peers, tutors, social workers and people with lived experience as it was "very supportive but with direct advice on how to improve" as "all feedback allows reflection" and that "it gave me something to think about and helped identify areas of development". Nevertheless, research participants felt that the feedback from people with lived experience and qualified social workers carried more weight, a kudos derived from experience. They valued the different lens provided from their lived experience, be that as a professional or as someone who has engaged with service provision.

Furthermore, research participants acknowledged that providing and discussing feedback and planning for sessions developed their confidence in talking in groups where they lacked that confidence, thus developing their groupwork skills. They acknowledged that they found it hard to provide constructive (not just positive) feedback, but found it

beneficial. Finally, the watching back of the recording of self added a further layer to the collaborative experiential model as it highlighted different strengths and areas for development and developed confidence.

Overall, the collaborative experiential learning model, incorporating teaching followed by a group role-play, feedback and reflection on self, evaluated well with the research participants. They reported the development of peer relationships, reflective skills, communication skills, planning skills, knowledge, confidence, groupwork skills and ability to give and receive feedback. Nevertheless, this development of knowledge and skills was dependent on a range of factors that impacted students' ability to engage learning. This included the positive group working dynamic, a supportive group, the attendance and engagement of all group members and the logistical foundations to facilitate the activity. Strong academic direction and support is recommended to facilitate the model effectively.