Observing Social Work Practice

It may be more of a challenge than you think!

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I’m a good social worker and I can spot effective practice ......
Two minute - Buzz

Talk to your neighbour for 2 minutes

How confident do you feel about using direct observation to support learning and assess practice capability?

What uncertainties, if any, do you have?
Direct Observation – when is it used?

Becoming an integral part of the assessment processes used for social workers at all levels.

• A requirement at qualifying level since 1991
• Now commonly used as part of assessment of NQSW’s during ASYE (not yet compulsory)
• Being introduced by many employers to monitor standards achieved by experienced social workers (not yet compulsory).

Direct observation is being given increasing importance in the assessment processes used for social workers at all levels.
Direct Observation – why is it used?

- Feels real and relevant
- See if a practitioner can do what they say they are doing.
- See the ‘whole picture’ including things like the service users reaction to the practitioner
- Provides the opportunity for developmental feedback directly linked to real life experience
- Can support the development of reflective practice

So, it certainly feels like direct observation is a really good way to support both learning and to assess practice…… but is it really as simple as that?
Reality check...reliability can be an issue

Very little research has been undertaken to check the validity and reliability of direct observation of social work practice. However...

• A major study – Measures of Effective Teaching funded by the Gates Foundation (2012) which included looking at direct observation of teachers in the USA concluded that reliability was very poor even when observers were trained and were using a very specific assessment tool (probability of two assessors reaching a different judgement 51-78%). They conclude direct observation must be used in conjunction with other measures and should always be based on observations by more than one assessor.

• The Sutton Trust (2013) concluded from a major literature review reported in the report ‘Testing Teachers’ that direct observation was the least reliable predictor of student outcomes and should only be used in ‘low stakes’ assessment situations where it could support reflection and professional development.
So assessor reliability may be a problem? Well here is the conundrum…..

• Assessors are **more** likely to agree if the observation process has a greater level of standardisation and uses more prescriptive measures **BUT**

  When this is the case, the predictive value of observation for real life capability decreases because nuanced subtleties of practice are screened out.

• Assessors are **less** likely to agree in situations which are close to practice and the ‘real world’ **BUT**

  The predictive value of observation for measuring capability does appear to increase.

Ruch.G et al (2015)*Evidence scope regarding the use of practice observation methods as part of the assessment of social work practice*. Research in Practice
Why might assessor unreliability be an issue?

• Observation produces a strong emotional response (both parties)
• Objectivity can be an issue (independent observer better?)
• Outcomes are often invisible (not always immediately clear if an objective has been achieved or not)
• There is rarely one fixed way to practice
• Observer may not understand the ‘bigger picture’
• Accepted good practice may be more about what is fashionable than effective
• We assume if you can ‘do it’ that you know what exactly is working and why and can spot effective practice in others – may not be the case.
• Humans have very selective observational and recall strategies – strong evidence from psychology research that important things can be missed / forgotten.
Its so easy to miss something important….

- Monkey business illusion
What does research tell us about improving direct observation?

- Role and skills of the practice educator / assessor are pivotal.

- Direct observation is most effective (in terms of assessment AND supporting learning) when it is experienced as developmental and constructive.

- Including meaningful and critical reflective dialogue improves outcomes.

Ruch et al (2015)

Devise a plan for future practice
Discuss learning
Set review for plan

Discuss corrective, confirmatory and reflective evaluations – observee first
Review process

Purpose, objectives, criteria, observers role, service user feedback, how and when will be feedback given

Follow agreed processes Including supporting process for feedback from service user / carer

1. Preparation: the rules of engagement

Negotiated Collaborative Model

2. Observation: The action

3. Debriefing & feedback: The learning

4. Next steps: practice development
Collaborative model – key points

• Emphasises learning and development and not box ticking and regulation (although does accommodate reporting processes) – may need a shift in mind set!
• Encourages participants to take ownership of their practice and their learning
• Suitable for experienced practitioners as well as students
• Self-evaluation is supported and then supplemented by feedback from observer and service user / carer -
• ‘Wondering’ feedback is encouraged by the model to deepen reflection
• Learning for both observer and observed is explored – supporting organisational learning.
• Service users and carers involvement is considered but not fully explored
Including the service users perspective in direct observation

• Gives prominence to the things that are important to service user / carer
• May raise issues not noticed or remembered by observer or observee - think about the monkey business illusion…
• May reduce impact of bias by including another perspective
• May help the observer and observee to check if objectives have really been achieved and if the methods used were effective and if another approach would have been preferred.
• Can help tease out what aspects of approach were particularly helpful or unhelpful

Video Clip 2
In your discussion groups

1. Consider the barriers to gaining meaningful feedback after a direct observation from the service user and/or carer.
2. Share information about the way you have gained feedback from service users and carers after a direct observation in the past.
3. Discuss the pro’s and con’s of gaining feedback immediately after the observation through a) a three way discussion, b) a discussion between the observer and the service user/carer or c) a discussion between the observee and service user/carer.
4. Are there other ways that the student could have gained meaningful feedback on this piece of observed practice? – what are the advantages and disadvantages of these methods?