Curriculum guide – Communication skills

Good communication is essential in social work. It is intrinsic to the forging of effective and compassionate professional relationships, thereby embodying social work’s humanity. This guide aims to help educators design and deliver a curriculum for communication skills in qualifying education. Communication transfers information between people; how it is done affects what is conveyed. It occurs face-to-face, on the phone, in sign language, via notes and images, through touch, or via interpreters when there is no common language. Letters, paper records and formal court reports are now supplemented by technological media (e.g. text, email, electronic records). Blogs and social networking sites need to be used with care by social workers, in line with professional codes of conduct. Skilled professional communication entails the deliberate use of specialised skills, tailored to particular goals and contexts. With practice, such skills are integrated into the social worker’s repertoire.

Where in the curriculum this topic might feature

Communication skills are a connecting thread throughout the qualifying curriculum, developed both in classrooms and in practice placements. Classroom learning can usefully take place at two stages: prior to first placement (assessed as part of ‘readiness to practise’); and prior to/during final placement, when more complex and challenging issues can be addressed. Learning about communication is an important part of the ‘30 days’ designated for practice-related work at university.

Key curriculum issues

- Domains of cognitive knowledge and research should be introduced, including service user perspectives, although skills themselves are learnt through practice.

- Students are required to practise initial skills in university prior to first placement. This may take place in small groups' and/or with service users and carers.a Making digital recordings facilitates practice, observation, self-reflection and feedback. Students need help in seeking and giving evidence-based feedback. Naturally occurring feedback may be opinion-based, speculative and overly critical or reassuring.

- Communication shapes and is shaped by context; students need help in fitting their communication to the context so a range of scenarios and situations should be provided.

- Respect is an important theme in the Professional Capabilities Framework. Its behavioural manifestation will emerge for analysis when students practise; attitudes and values become ‘live’.

- Skills in communication are judged through interpersonal interaction, and students will be sensitive to comments. They need to know that mistakes (and their retrieval) invariably accompany learning. Behaviour may be awkward and clumsy as new skills are integrated.

- Writing and ICT skills can be taught as core skills, or integrally in other curriculum areas. Guidance about the appropriate use of social networking sites should be given.

- ICT can obstruct or aid communication. See Hill and Shaw (2011)iii for a critical discussion.

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**Topic guide: key content areas**

Social workers continually move from one context to another, making role shifts that call on a subset of their skills, e.g. playing with a child to ascertain wishes and feelings, or arguing a case in court. A generic qualifying programme will provide students with foundation skills. The list below includes more specialised and challenging topics that may be introduced in the classroom and on placement, but will only be consolidated through post-qualification experience and learning. The following topics are suggested:

1. Service users’ and carers’ views: the value of good communication, e.g. Munro (2011)
2. Evidence about effective communication, e.g. Horvath and Greenberg (1994)
3. Differences between ‘ordinary’ and ‘professional’ conversations, e.g. Drew and Heritage (1992)
4. Intrapersonal knowledge. The value of ‘tuning in’ to oneself and the client (e.g. Shulman (2008)); building self-observing reflective ability; knowing, containing and expressing emotion.
5. Interpersonal skills: relating in a human way whilst structuring the context. Skills include conveying vitality, interest, warmth, empathic resonance and humour; explaining the purpose of the work; using different types of question; listening astutely and reflecting accurately; understanding non-verbal cues; agreeing a plan of work; summarising and naming next steps; managing time.
6. Communicating with children, using play, art and developmentally appropriate activities.
7. Speech, language and communication issues in adolescents.
8. Family work: family dynamics; engaging members; working with conflicting perspectives.
9. Group work: group dynamics; engaging all members purposefully; teamwork.
10. Cross-cultural communication: e.g. using interpreters, sensitivity to non-verbal cultural norms.
11. Visual and tactile communication, e.g. Makaton, British sign language, fingerspelling.
12. Managing and using one’s own ‘good authority’, e.g. Ferguson (2011)
14. Communicating with other professionals.
15. Courtroom skills.

**Links to other curriculum areas (including other curriculum guides) and significance of the issue to different age/user groups**

- Areas supporting the student’s professional development (e.g. preparation for practice, reflective practice, learning from service users and carers, and placement-based learning).
- Assessment: how to translate theories and models into interpersonal practice.
- Childhood development: how children and young people communicate at different developmental stages.
- Children and families: how to work together with parents and children, fostering a relationship with the parent wherever possible whilst maintaining a focus on the child’s needs.
- Health and disability: how to adapt communication for some people with learning difficulties or disabilities, hearing impairments, visual impairments, aphasia.
- Older people, especially those with dementia, and the importance of a person-centred approach.
- Mental health: certain mental states temporarily affect people’s ability to process information and respond to it, so adaptations are needed.

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• Involuntary or reluctant clients: how to address difficult issues, e.g. inadequate parenting, or allegations of mistreatment of vulnerable people, or unwillingness to engage.
• Assessment of risk and vulnerability.
Key resources

1. SWAPBox: [http://www.swapbox.ac.uk](http://www.swapbox.ac.uk) Search terms: Communication, Communication skills.


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