

**Mend the Gap:
Collaborative Learning with Service Users
(Module PP0554)**

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Origins

How I came to be involved

PowerUs Charter of Principles

BA (Hons) Guidance & Counselling
MSc (Hons) Health and Social Care

Level 5 Options Modules

Service Users

being a service user is about the assertion of entitlement to receive welfare services

(Shaping Our Lives, 2024)

The module

runs over 10 three-hour sessions

involves a small and balanced number of students and people with experience as service users

asylum seekers, refugees, disabled people with various physical, sensory, cognitive and emotional impairments, and transgender people

2024: people involved all have some experience of emotional distress, or are transgender, or are autistic people (some are more than one of these)

Freire's (2017) Pedagogy of the Oppressed

education for liberation

move away from banking education

Small groups

Students quite young with relatively limited life experience

Service users have long and interesting histories behind them

Katie Lewins:

Having external students, not knowing anything about them beforehand, is awkward at first as they are older and new. But the more we communicate, and the more sessions attended, the more comfortable I feel working together.

Issues identified:

Discrimination: Misdiagnosis: Sexism: Class: Domestic abuse: Gender abuse: Roles as natural: Diagnosis: Bullying (acceptance of poor treatment): I'm the problem' (accepting passive roles imposed): System reinforces it: Appearances: Power and professionals: Medicalisation and power: Dealing with institutions: Asking for help: Fear: Relationships with people: Compliance: Empowerment: 2010 Equality Act: Psychiatrists and medicalisation: Different professional views: Being heard and believed

Theoretical bit

Freire: action without understanding just leads to activism.

Understanding without action leads nowhere.

The point of creating praxis is to develop theory-informed action.

Natasha Downs:

I enjoyed the lecture portion of the course as I found learning theory which complemented the understanding of my own lived-experiences insightful... Through helping us inform the direction of the course, the issue of power imbalance between teacher/participant was somewhat redressed. I appreciate what this symbolised structurally— both are equally as useful as sources of knowledge.

Natasha Downs:

Another positive aspect of the experience was the smorgasbord of recommended literature. Through sending us a range of materials, ranging from books, journal articles and student dissertations, the lived-experience participants were able to engage at whatever level they felt comfortable with. There was never pressure to read all of the literature, however, the materials were made accessible if we wished to read around the subject.

Group projects

books, newsletters, Talking Heads videos, podcasts, and developed women's safety campaigns

a series of reflective letters to their younger and older selves

a podcast based on interviews with the two service users involved and student reflections on what they had learned

a presentation addressing service users' experiences of misdiagnosis, followed by an interactive exercise identifying and mending gaps relating to professional practice and service delivery

Niamh Page:

I found that this was the part I was most excited for each week, to share insights with one another and really grasp how people viewed the system through their own experiences. But it also went beyond that as we spoke about our general topics of interest and beliefs in relation to what we had learnt that day. Although I found this daunting to begin with, I really enjoyed the freedom of choosing the creative way of producing this work and what subject we could focus on and I believe that freedom helped create a lovely friendship between the service users and students.

Emily Gibbinson:

The hours go by so quick, it is unbelievable and you think 'Wow! This lesson is over already!' Every Thursday without fail.

Mark each student gets for their project work is secondary to the learning which has taken place as a result of the process they have been involved in

Emily Gibbinson:

I feel like this is the most valuable module we have done because it is consistent – every Thursday, to really get to grips of different opinions and experiences with different topics we are learning in different weeks... I feel like we have created a bond within our group and I will treasure that.

Libby Walker:

The 'process' overall, not just the outcome of working together to produce a final project for the assignment. The actual process of sitting and just 'being' 'blended' together each week. The process is what worked, we became united and merged, the barriers were shifted organically. I like feeling like I and other service users had input in the students journeys as the future generation of health care workers. In the final project you can see the students see how society conditions people to believe they are the problem. Students learned to be critical about power, control, equality, social structure, social norms, cultural constructs, and are clearly aware of the gap now after this module.

Service users registered as students for the course of the semester

Access to the University library

Other expenses covered

Certificate of attendance

No official accreditation

Reasons to do with the fact that students pay fees to do their degrees, and involve complications around that

Niamh Page:

The group that I ended up becoming a part of would be with the self-proclaimed “Cheeky Girls” and I never left my Thursday afternoons without laughing. I have been so glad to have met these two ladies and I am so grateful that they were able to open up to us all in the group about their trauma and experiences to help us really gauge an understanding of what we can challenge when we become healthcare professionals ourselves.

Rachel Weatheritt:

Mend the Gap should be a required part of every professional qualifying degree, not just optional and not just at Northumbria. Teachers, social workers, nurses, police, physios and OTs, as well as counsellors and health and social care. Wherever any future role involves power relationships, the students need to be learning from service users like this.

Gap Mending approach:

reaches the parts other modules cannot reach