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Janine Bolger

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What is This?
Video self-modelling and its impact on the development of communication skills within social work education

Janine Bolger
Faculty of Health & Social Care, Robert Gordon University, UK

Abstract

- **Summary:** This article describes the evaluation of a programme which utilised video self-modelling to develop communication skills and associated skills of reflection and self-assessment within social work education at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, Scotland. Video self-modelling techniques were adopted utilising role-play scenarios, simulating situations commonly encountered in social work practice, with social work students prior to their first period of Practice Learning. Eleven participants were observed via video footage and independently rated according to the communication skills they displayed. Group discussion in conjunction with pre- and post-test questionnaires encouraged participants to reflect on their practice.

- **Findings:** The greatest increase in the frequency of observations of desirable communication skills was most often achieved by participants who had scored the lowest in the rating of their skills during the pre-test videos. Overall there was no statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-tests scores with regard to the communication skills demonstrated. By contrast, all 11 participants expressed a belief that the majority of their skills had improved as a result of experiencing video self-modelling techniques which led to a greater level of reflective practice and growth in self-efficacy with regard to their professional competence.

- **Applications:** This approach can be applied to measure the impact development of communication skills on social work courses.

**Corresponding author:**
Janine Bolger, Faculty of Health & Social Care, Robert Gordon University, Garthdee Road, Aberdeen AB10 7QG, UK.
Email: j.l.bolger@rgu.ac.uk
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social work, reflective practice, communication, social work education, video self-modelling, skills

Introduction
Service users often approach social work services when in crisis and so there is a need for clarity and sensitivity on the part of the social worker as they establish a pattern of communication (Davies as cited in Lishman, 2009). It is the responsibility of the social worker to communicate clearly and accurately to improve the likelihood of a positive outcome through any interaction (Coulshed & Orme, 2006). It is how people act out their roles in society and how they react within societal structures that give purpose to the social work interview (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Therefore it is critically important that information about the interpersonal nature of communication and its place within the social work task is conveyed to, understood and practised by pre-qualifying students rather than simply emphasising the regulatory demands to develop skills placed on them by external bodies. The professional trainee is expected to achieve competence in performance in both generic and discipline-specific areas through the development of communication skills which are useful in a variety of settings. Additionally, in order to ‘make professional practice more accountable through ongoing scrutiny of the principles upon which it is based’ it is crucial to encourage the development of reflective practice (Fook, 2007, p. 363).

The BA (Hons) Social Work or equivalent post-graduate qualification was set as the recognised professional qualification for social workers in Scotland in 2004. It is based on a set of learning requirements that each programme must meet through planning and service delivery which form the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE) (Scottish Social Services Council, 2006). Within this framework social work programmes in Scotland are required to promote the development of transferable skills and abilities for those in training. Transferable skills in communication are specifically highlighted throughout the SiSWE along with the need for qualifying social workers to possess the ability to communicate clearly and accurately (Scottish Social Services Council, 2006). Furthermore, the Changing Lives Report recommends that social workers develop new ways of working and take on new roles in order to meet the changing demands of society (Scottish Government, 2006). This research was undertaken to explore whether video feedback was an effective tool in the improvement of communication skills in social workers in training and thereby contribute to the stock of evidence about professional education.

The use of video feedback in skills teaching
The positive aspect of using video replay in skills teaching has been found to be the way in which it allows a microanalysis of human interaction to be carried out
(Bales as cited in Rosenstein, 2002). This means that the student can identify and understand behaviours, which might contain too much information to be remembered and understood by being processed purely through memory. ‘The process of video review is a powerful and effective teaching tool providing guidance for experiential learning and reflective self-assessment’, (Roter et al., 2004, p. 156). Rosenstein (2002) outlined the use of the camera to capture the ‘reality’ which is to be evaluated before feeding back to those involved, to encourage them to reflect on their performance. Walter and Wilson (Decker, 1983) suggest that video feedback, as part of a programme based on behaviour modelling, brings about a greater level of skill development when compared to feedback given only by an educator. Mills and Pace (1989) found that practice and feedback each seemed to influence different aspects of learning. Whilst practice appeared to heighten the potential to acquire information about what to do, feedback seemed to increase performance scores. It was suggested that the combination of both practice and video feedback, over time, produced the greatest effect on long-term performance scores (Mills & Pace, 1989).

For the purpose of learning and analysis the film footage can be viewed repeatedly if necessary by many people and at different times. However, there are significant logistical (time consuming), ethical (anxiety of students when being filmed) and methodological (reliance on individual interpretation) issues, which limit the use and effectiveness of feedback utilising film footage (Roter et al., 2004).

**Aim of the research**

The aim of this research was to explore the use of video feedback as a potentially effective tool in the development of communication skills among social workers in training.

**Methodology**

To explore any development in communication skills, as a result of the utilisation of video feedback, an experimental approach incorporating a pre-coded system was used. The advantage of utilising an experimental approach in this research is that it allowed the researcher to reduce instances of observed behaviour to a numerical format so that the changes in frequency of behaviour throughout the programme can be more easily recorded (Bull, 2002). Coding systems utilised by outside observers can be highly informative by offering a helpful ‘aid’ to perception, i.e. they can help identify behavioural patterns/sequences that might not be obvious to the untrained. It is vital, however, that in this process of reducing aspects of communication in order to measure them that we do not consider context and meaning only as specified by their categorisation (Bull, 2002).

In addition students were asked to reflect upon and categorise their skill level which offered an understanding of how the participant feels about the prospect of video work; how well they believe they communicate; and to what they attribute
any change, thereby enhancing the interpretation and understanding of any skill development which occurs. The integration of both experimental data and details of students' observations offers a more robust interpretation of the phenomena.

The design of this research has taken the form of a one group pre-test/post-test single group design by measuring the frequency that a student demonstrates desirable behaviours over four videos.

Sample

The population, with regard to this research, was the total number of students at this stage in the course undertaking video work within the skills module, which totalled 51 students at the Robert Gordon University. Only one male student was represented in the group but this was in keeping with the ratio of only 5 men in the total population of 51 students undertaking the skills module. The researcher and rater were both female. Ten out of eleven participants were white Scottish, as was the rater. The researcher was white and Welsh by ethnic origin. It was both interesting and important to consider any relationship between gender, ethnicity and deportment with regard to communication during the analysis of the video footage.

The sample was small: it consisted of only eleven students that made up one seminar group. Students from one group were selected in an attempt to ensure that there was consistency in approach as a result of input from the same educator throughout. The sample was randomly selected by virtue of the students being chosen by an administrator to be in specific seminar groups for a range of subjects. As a result of the size and the nature of the pre-determined seminar groupings the selection process was more akin to a non-probability sampling technique. While such a small group cannot be representative of students in general it may be viewed as typical of an RGU student group. In addition, there was no expectation, as a result of the interview process and academic entry requirements that are a prerequisite of beginning the course, that real extremes in performance would be found i.e. students in possession of either excellent or very poor skills (Denscombe, 2005). The seminar group also provided a balance of mature and experienced students and was therefore in keeping with the process of the ‘principle of randomisation’ which occurs naturally as a result of the equal chances of each individual of being selected (Mark, 1996, p. 107).

Setting

All observations of the 11 students were conducted as part of a two-hour taught session within a classroom. All classrooms for seminar groups were of the same size and located in the same building. Each group set the physical scene according to the setting of the role-play e.g. by moving furniture to represent a home setting or office space etc.
The process

Component behaviours were made explicit prior to commencement of filming (Gask, Goldberg & Boardman, 1998) thus ensuring that the assessment criterion was clear to all participants (Burgess, 1999). Pendleton’s rules (Pendleton, Schofield & Tate, 1984) were applied throughout the preparation, filming and feedback phases in order to ‘offer a safe environment in which learners are able to assess their own performance freely…’ (p. 306). The initial stage requires that the educator should ‘clarify matters of fact briefly’ (Pendleton et al., 1984 cited in Vassilas and Ho, 2000) The use of communication skills were discussed with the whole group prior to filming and in relation to the specific case scenario to be role played in an attempt to sensitise them through developing knowledge of the skills to be practised. For 10 min prior to filming students were encouraged to share ideas and to support and encourage each other in ‘readiness for practice’ drawing on the skills and considering areas for further improvement as identified by the group during the previous feedback.

The role-play took place in front of the rest of the group and the filming was carried out by the educator. Each film taken was of three minutes in length although each role-play continued for between 5 and 8 min. The first 2 min of the role-play was not recorded allowing the participant some time to relax and engage with the task. The role-play continued for three minutes post filming.

Participants were given a context in which to operate through the use of role-play scenarios, a technique familiar to social workers in training. The role-play was carried out with peers taking on the role of service-users and utilising background information supplied in an attempt to emulate real practice situations. The ‘simulated’ service-users were coached at the beginning of each session to present the social problems outlined within each role-play situation but were not trained to behave in any standardised way. They were encouraged to respond in role to the ‘behaviour’ of the social worker.

The skills work followed a 10-week programme whereby the nature of each role-play was dictated by the content of the preceding lecture. No individual task was considered to be more complex than any other. In order to emulate case work the same family was used throughout the programme with additional information being given depending on the experience of the ‘family’ in the intervening period. Students were expected to remember background information from the previous week.

After each videoed session, the educator played the film back to the participants, stopping approximately every 20 seconds to ask which of the desirable behaviours had been observed. The skills identified by the student, therefore, set the agenda for discussion. The second turn was offered to the group to engage them in problem-solving by encouraging them to identify what they think has been done well (Pendleton et al., 1984). This stage of the process was based on the understanding that ‘the interview was a valuable tool for the whole group’ (Vassilas & Ho, 2000, p. 306). Finally, the third turn was taken by the educator with an emphasis placed
on positive feedback. The focus was on outcomes identified as the object of the interview (Vassilas & Ho, 2000). Feedback was descriptive offering specific statements such as ‘you have lowered your tone of voice and the service-user has made good eye contact with you’.

The educator also considered living examples as they occurred ‘which addresses the performative dimension of communicative competence’ (Dickson et al., 1997, p. 23). Living examples arise from a situation where the educator can draw attention to the fact that the specified skill is being demonstrated in real time, in the here and now, e.g. ‘you are tilting and nodding your head now – just like you were doing in the video’.

When shortcomings were identified by a participant, ideas for improvement were highlighted through the provision of balanced feedback by identifying aspects of the interview on film that appeared to work and those that might be done differently. If the participant highlighted a poor or limited expression of skills their opinion was recognised and a working point established for the next session. Alternative suggestions could be made and practised during the next role-play (Vassilas & Ho, 2000).

At the end of each viewing participants were asked to identify an area of skill that had been improved and an aspect, which required further development for future sessions. In feedback, films may be watched repeatedly as behaviours are identified and discussed. The key is for the educator and the group to remain supportive. The educator ended the feedback session by structuring and summarising what has been learned to ensure that areas for improvement are not the only focus (Vassilas & Ho, 2000). The immediacy of the feedback is believed to encourage greater clarity from students with regard to the skills, which they have demonstrated and help allay anxieties whilst reinforcing learning.

Data analysis

After the final session the video footage was viewed by an independent rater employed to ensure that information was collected in a manner which was both full and unambiguous (Bell, 1999). The video footage ensured that a record was made of events as they occurred and that the account was as full as the observation itself (Robson, 2002).

The rater was provided with a DVD of footage representing the involvement of participants in each of the skills classes that they participated in. The first film was assessed to establish a skills base line for each participant from which any developments could be easily measured. The rater employed an event coding system to record the frequency of the occurrence of desirable behaviours. The data was recorded according to the desirable behaviours demonstrated at 5-second intervals.

The criteria for agreeing a measurement of each of the desirable behaviours were agreed with the rater as follows:

1. Being attentive (listening and responding with regard to the importance of what is being said);
2. ‘Yes body’ (postures of interest and support conveyed through body immediacy);
3. ‘Yes verbal’ (encouragement and indication of reception through short verbal prompts);
4. Eye contact (availability for communication through gaze);
5. Turn taking (the making and reception of an initiative followed by the taking of a turn by the recipient);
6. Attuned guiding (support conveyed through the making of choice/appropriate suggestions);
7. Rest (purposeful silence to allow space for thought/response);
8. Discordant Response (disengagement or lack of concordance between the initiative of the service-user and the response of the interviewer).

Each time the rater observed the demonstration of one of the above skills within each period it was recorded. When the rater failed to observe any of these skills they then decided whether they were observing a period of rest or a discordant response. The frequency of occurrence of these desirable behaviours was measured in the first and final sessions in order to determine whether the intervention of video feedback had been successful.

To offer structure to the interpretation of behavioural sequences for analysis, aspects of the outline for ‘The Calgary-Cambridge Observation Guide’ were considered (Vassilas & Ho, 2000). For example, part one of the guide which draws on primary interviewing skills in the form of how the interview begins (i.e. greetings, introduction and agenda setting); the manner in which information is gathered (i.e. style of questioning, giving turns and receiving initiatives, listening, checking-out); the way in which a relationship is built (i.e. non-verbal behaviour, conveying empathy); and the manner in which explanation, future planning and termination of the interview is carried out (Vassilas & Ho, 2000). The aspect of the guide which most clearly applied to the stage of the interview in which filming had taken place was utilised.

Results and discussion

Data was analysed using SPSS. In order to ascertain whether two sets of data are different to a significant level the most appropriate statistical test is the $t$-test. The $t$-test is a parametric test and therefore makes some assumptions about the nature of population distribution and parameters. Given that there was a need to compare the means of related subjects it is the paired $t$-test that was utilised. In order to ascertain whether there were differences, to a significant level, between the scores obtained at pre-test and post-test stages with the same subjects, the paired two-group $t$-test was administered. This test is also helpful in analysing data gained from a small sample size.

The chance of obtaining a statistically significant result is usually recognised as increasing in line with a growth in the sample size. Alternatively it can be argued...
that the identification of statistical significance in a smaller sample will only illustrate the strongest associations and could, therefore, be seen to offer the most robust results (Robson, 2002).

**Quantitative data**

Pre-test/post-test results of data indicate an increase in the mean amount (the average of all scores based on adding them together and dividing them by their number) in some skill areas: the frequency of observations increased for four participants in five skill areas (attentiveness; use of positive body language (NVCs); use of positive verbal communication; appropriate eye-contact; and turn taking); and for three participants in the skill of guiding:

**Attentiveness**

The first videos, used as a benchmark from which to measure any development, evidenced a spread of between 10 and 33 observations of attentiveness with a range of 23. After the use of video feedback a dispersion of between 12 and 35 was recorded and, as can be seen from Figure 1, evidenced a range again of 23.

In running a paired t-test the results can be reported as follows: The mean response latency for before the use of video feedback ($M = 23.55$, $SD = 6.788$) was lower than the mean calculated after the use of VF ($M = 23.64$, $SD = 5.888$).
The paired-samples t-test showed no significance beyond the 0.05 level. A Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test showed the difference between the median scores for attentiveness before and after the use of Video Feedback (the same as reported above for the paired t-tests). Test results failed to show a significance with \( p = 0.506 \) (2-tailed). For the scoring on ‘attentiveness’ we can see that in 6 out of 11 cases the score was greater prior to the use of VF.

**Yes body**

As can be seen in Figure 2 between 8 and 33 observations of positive body language, with a range of 25, were recorded in the initial video in comparison to a minimum of 6 and maximum of 35 (a range of 29), after participants had experienced video feedback.

In running a paired-samples t-test the mean response before video feedback was \((M = 21.09, SD = 8.080)\) was less than the mean for after VF \((M = 21.18, SD = 9.315)\). A paired samples t-test failed to show any significance.

In carrying out a non-parametric equivalent of the t-tests (Wilcoxon test; related samples), we can see that no significance has been demonstrated \( p = 0.760 \) (2-tailed). Additionally for the scoring on ‘yes body’ we can see that in 6 out of 11 cases the score was greater prior to the use of VF.

![Figure 2. Yes Body.](image-url)
Yes verbal

A minimum of 8 and a maximum of 31 examples of positive verbal communication, offering a range of 23, was noted on the initial films while between 7 and 35 incidents were observed in the final video with a range of 27 as can be observed in Figure 3.

In running a paired samples $t$-test the mean response latency before video feedback ($M = 20.55$, $SD = 6.743$) was greater than the mean after VF ($M = 18.91$, $SD = 8.300$). A paired samples test failed to show significance.

In carrying out the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test we can see that there was no significance $p = 0.328$ (2-tailed). For the scoring on ‘yes verbal’ we can see that in 7 out of 11 cases the score was greater prior to the use of VF.

Eye contact

With regard to observations of eye contact, between 9 and 33 examples were recorded from the first videos in comparison to between 11 and 35 in the final films both demonstrating the same range of 24 as can be seen in Figure 4.
In running a paired samples $t$-test the mean response latency before video feedback ($M = 23.27$, $SD = 6.886$) is less than the mean after VF ($M = 23.36$, $SD = 7.018$). A paired samples test failed to show significance.

In carrying out the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test we can see that there is no significance $p = 0.358$ (2-tailed). Also for the scoring on ‘eye contact’ we can see that in 6 out of 11 cases the score was greater prior to the use of VF.

**Turn taking**

A minimum of 5 and a maximum of 29 incidents of turn taking were observed during the initial film footage giving a range of 24 compared to between 8 and 35 in the final film with a range of 27 as can be seen in Figure 5.

In running a paired samples $t$-test the mean response latency before video feedback ($M = 17.09$, $SD = 6.188$) was greater than the mean after VF ($M = 16.64$, $SD = 8.936$). A paired samples test failed to show significance.

In carrying out the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test we can see no significance $p = 0.799$ (2-tailed). For the scoring on ‘turn taking’ we can see that in 6 out of 11 cases the score was greater prior to the use of video feedback.
Leading and guiding

Between 1 and 16 examples, with a range of 15, were noted in the benchmark film, as demonstrated in Figure 6, in comparison to a minimum of 0 and maximum of 24 in the last film displaying a range of 24.

In running a paired samples $t$-test the mean response latency before video feedback ($M = 6.27, SD = 4.174$) was greater than the mean after VF ($M = 5.91, SD = 7.739$). The paired samples test failed to show significance beyond the 0.05 level.

In carrying out the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test it failed to show significance $p = 0.414$ (2-tailed). For the scoring on ‘guiding’ we can see that in 7 out of 11 cases the score was greater prior to the use of VF.

Interestingly, the greatest increase in the frequency of observations of desirable behaviours was most often achieved by participants who had scored the lowest in the rating of the pre-test videos. This finding is reflected in a number of research projects around the use of this video feedback that have highlighted particular success in improving the interpersonal skills of those with basic patterns of communication (Wels, 2004).
Students’ opinions

In the pre-test questionnaire only two students did not convey anxiety; one presented the lowest score in the initial video and displayed improvement in all areas other than turn taking; while a decrease in skill level in all categories was recorded for the second participant. It would appear then that the level of anxiety displayed by participants prior to filming does not necessarily impact on their ability to either demonstrate or improve upon their communication skills.

When asked to consider the aspect of video feedback that participants anticipated would be most beneficial to them, four students specifically stated that they thought it would assist them in developing their skills. Three other participants documented their interest in examining their own skills in more detail acknowledging the power of microanalysis through comments such as ‘You don’t normally see your facial expressions or slight movements you make so the video helps highlight this’; anticipating improvement in self-efficacy e.g. ‘Seeing what I am good at will build my confidence’; and focussing on the examination of the skills demonstrated during specific tasks e.g. ‘Seeing how you conduct yourself in an interview situation’.

Five participants voiced initial concerns about seeing themselves on film, that their nervousness around being filmed could impact on their performance and that seeing themselves might in fact decrease levels of self-esteem. Two students worried about the artificiality of the exercise i.e. that ‘the role-play scenarios will not reflect real life situations very well’ and ‘being watched by others when you do it as you won’t be watched by others in the future’.

![Leading and Guiding](image-url)
In the post-test questionnaire all 11 participants expressed a belief that the majority of their skills had improved as a result of experiencing video feedback. Some students commented on specific skills gained, e.g. ‘I can now follow on from answers given by service-users and don’t just ask random questions’; the ‘video enabled me to see my body language/eye contact and make changes’. Others identified more general changes, e.g. ‘I can see what I’m doing well and continue it’ and ‘I can see the impact (of my actions) on the client’; ‘I am aware of things that I do naturally’. Comments were also made with regard to how participants felt about themselves e.g. (I) ‘feel more comfortable in (regard to my) own social work skills now’, and how they retrospectively viewed the application of video feedback, e.g. ‘it was very useful after I forgot about the camera’ and ‘getting more used to the video has made me more relaxed in general’.

In cross-matching comments made by participants in the questionnaires to the experimental results gained through rating the number of observations of the core skills it appears that those who achieved higher scores tended to underestimate the level of their progress while those who demonstrated a lower number of skills overestimated levels of improvement. This is an issue that has also been highlighted in other studies (Falchikov & Boud as cited in Cartney, 2006). This may simply confirm the premise that ‘reflection is a highly individualised activity, its outcomes difficult to generalize to other people and situations’ (Fook as cited in Lishman, 2007, p. 373). Whatever the accuracy of their perceptions, it appears that all participants held a positive view of the usefulness of video feedback in skills training.

**Discussion**

The experimental results from this programme evaluation suggest that there is a relationship between the use of video self-modelling and the development of communication skills but only for those participants who demonstrated poorest communication skills at the beginning of the programme. Some participants were more familiar than others in working with specific service-user groups although none of them had prior experience of the situations dictated by the role-play scenarios within the skills programme. It is clear from the range of benchmark scores that some students were more skilled than others at the start of the programme. It might be concluded then that the level of skill pre-test is likely to influence the level of skill development evidenced post-test.

The testimonies of the participants, suggests that the programme increased their ability to reflect on their practice; improved their confidence in their communication skills and generally resulted in a greater degree of self-efficacy with regard to their professional competence. Although participants admitted anxiety at the outset, all claimed to be more relaxed and confident at the final filming with their perceptions or beliefs (self-efficacy) about their communication changing even though their skill level might not have.
Role-play within the classroom setting offered a safe environment in which the student was supported to experiment or take risks with regard to the practising of skills. A level of control was exercised with regard to the complexity of what the student was required to deal with in comparison to a practice situation. The use of simulations appeared to be helpful in that support or instruction can be offered where appropriate.

Decker (1983) discovered that the most effective skills rehearsal programme involves video feedback and takes place in small groups with only one or two observers. It is possible then that the utilisation of smaller skills group at RGU promoted feelings of choice and a greater likelihood of openness whilst serving to sustain the inter-personal aspects of the teaching programme.

Other relevant research has suggested that the number of peer observations conducted have a direct impact on the behaviour reproduction scores (Decker, 1983). In this research 2 participants experienced 5 feedback sessions and made no improvements in any area; Four students took part in four feedbacks, two of whom demonstrated no improvement in any area, one of those participants improved in five and one in four out of six skills areas; Five participants took part in only three video feedback sessions with one demonstrating no improvement in any skills area, two each improved in one area, one participant improved in four areas whilst the remaining student improved in all six areas of skill development. It does not appear then that a clear link between the number of feedback sessions and overall improvement in skill level was evident.

Limitations

Although used extensively the pre-test/post-test single group design is believed to have a number of disadvantages that appear to pose a threat to its validity. Firstly, we cannot guard against the occurrence of other events in between the use of video feedback and so there is no way of distributing internal validity factors. Although we can make comparisons between the performances of students within the group, we cannot be certain that any progress or deterioration has not been brought about by some other variable (Mark, 1996). This design might also have been limited by the absence of another pre-tested control group (Robson, 2002). The inclusion of such a group might have proved useful in order to measure the changes in skill levels in both groups (Denscombe, 2005).

The main challenge to the validity of the findings through analysis of experimental data in this study is in the interpretation of the information contained within the questionnaires. A flaw is found in the design of the pre- and post-test questionnaires that are not matched for either the number of responses (3 in the first as compared to 7 in the second) or the nature of the questions posed.

It might be that in reducing aspects of communication to specific micro skills, in order to measure them, has restricted consideration of context and meaning (Bull, 2002). A final consideration is around the length of time taken to integrate new
skills into existing patterns of behaviour. It might be that the opportunity for more videoed sessions would allow students time to consolidate their learning.

**Implications**

This research was carried out on the premise that ‘...we currently lack a knowledge base for the best ways of learning and teaching communication skills, since the learning processes involved are complex and have rarely been evaluated...’ (Trevithick et al., in Koprowska, 2008, p.2). The central research question for this study is whether the implementation of video self-modelling techniques in a teaching programme for social work students brings about developments in the level of communication skills observed.

The results from this study do not suggest that the relationship between the use of video feedback and the development of communication skills is significant, although minor changes in some skill areas can be seen. The testimonies of the participants however does suggest that the programme has raised the awareness of students, assisting them in improving their confidence in their practice and resulting in a greater degree of self-efficacy with regard to their professional competence. Developing even greater levels of awareness in students may be necessary to improving the communication skills of social workers in training. As the application of communication skills is important, further exploration into methods of encouraging transfer of skills around reflective practice from simulation to professional practice would be useful.

It is obvious that the purpose of developing and assessing communication skills in social work students is to improve their interactions with service-users and colleagues. Social workers are required to engage and work with emotion across a variety of contexts and so teaching and learning around communication skills involves developing understanding of how we regulate expression of emotion in others and ourselves. If we agree that ‘the goal of careseeking is effective caregiving’ (McCluskey, 2005, p. 248) and is dependent on the worker’s ability to demonstrate empathetic attunement to the service-user, then, a greater focus on the ability of the student to negotiate the dynamics of care-seeking is crucial.

It would appear, then, that the challenge of teaching communication skills appropriate to the contemporary social work environment is ongoing.

Ethical approval for this study was gained from the University’s Research Committee and permission was obtained from participating students. The provision of information specific to the performance of the individual is in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 sections 7(1)(a), 7(1)(b) and 7(1)(c)(i).

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