



# First year students learning community profiling skills

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## Course details

**Course title:** Social Work and Applied Social Studies

**Level:** Undergraduate Programme

**Year:** Year 1

**Module title:** Community profiling: community needs assessment, groups and teamwork in practice.

**Discipline/Subject areas** Social Work

**Keywords:** Community needs; assessment; user involvement; participative action research

## Activity details

### What we did

We met with students learning community profiling skills in focus groups during their first year in order to evaluate what they had learnt and the links they made between their learning and their understanding of the social work degree curriculum.

### Why we did it

We have been teaching community profiling at the University of Bath for many years and have, with the new degree, counted the practice element of this course unit as practice learning days – 30 over the two semesters of the first year. We were interested to know what students were learning through the university and practice learning elements of the unit and to see whether it was appropriate learning for a degree in social work, from the students' point of view, with reference to the occupational standards, and from our own beliefs about what social work students should learn on a degree programme.

Barbra Teater, coming from teaching and practice in the USA was intrigued to discover social work students were learning such skills and we decided to take the results of our research to the social work education community to discover whether it was something that others are engaged in or would be interested in.

## What we wanted to achieve

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the unit 'Community Profiling' in teaching first year students the basic skills in communication, interviewing, and community needs assessment and the place of social work values in enriching their practice.

## A short description of what we did

In order to address the relevance of community profiling on practice learning, we held a series of three focus groups with students. We also wanted to seek the views of community profiling projects by hosting organizations, so we also gave two project supervisors the opportunity to share their views.

For the focus groups we used a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of six questions. Each focus group, and individual interview, lasted between 40-60 minutes. All focus groups, and individual interview with supervisors, were audio taped, and each was transcribed for analysis.

The analysis yielded 5 emergent themes:

1. Importance of service user involvement in defining "needs"
2. Ability to challenge one's assumptions
3. Enhancement of research skills
4. Ability to enhance groupwork/teamwork skills
5. Ability to apply lecture material to the "real" world

SWAP web case study form/01.11.07/mj

## What worked well

- The level of engagement of students in the research project was impressive.
- The fact that students are making the kind of links between knowledge, skills and values for this module and the whole degree programme, as we were hoping.
- Students, in reflecting on their learning from this module were able to be clearer in their minds what they were learning and its place in their broader education for professional social work practice.
- Students are learning through a well-balanced combination of classroom and practice-based learning opportunities.
- The project co-ordinators we engaged with were very positive about student engagement and about community profiling as a method of assessment generally.

## Problems and/or issues

- Students get little opportunity to follow up their community profiling practice in other practice learning settings.
- Some projects have misunderstood the purpose of the project, although dealing with such problems enables them to better understand what a community profile can achieve for their organisation.

## What students thought about it

Students said the following in focus group discussions:

- "It [community profiling] could be a way of certain groups giving their opinion, being listened to...."
- "...the active participation of the community was important so that they can tell you what that need is and it's not just you imposing that need ....."
- "...it has also given us a chance to question our own stereotypes and our prejudices..."
- "... what we are looking at here is the practical application of methodologies and of social studies so this is [...] practical experience of a research project."
- "...it can actually be so different learning about things academically and then putting it into practice...I think it gives you a bigger insight into how to deal with day to day problems which academically may seem pretty easy."

- “Community Profiling is the way that social work SHOULD be practised – you know, working with service users rather than *for* them all the time, so it’s kind of showing a new way to social work practice really ....”
- “When we were told we were going to do a Community Profile, we couldn’t really realise what that was – I was not sure at first and it is only now we have come to the end that I realise what a difference it can make.”

## Key messages

There were a number of things that students learnt about and these were congruent with our hopes for this course unit:

- The place of Community Action in social work practice
- That involvement of service users is essential for needs assessment
- The usefulness of research and learning research methods
- Empowerment – both to themselves and to service users/communities
- Recommendations from community profiling projects were integrated into the agency – the students were able to see their practice made a difference

## Related documents or links

Hawtin, M. Hughes, G. Percy-Smith, J. (2007) *Community Profiling: A Practical Guide* (2nd Edition). Buckingham: Open University Press

Percy-Smith, J (1996) *Needs Assessment in Public Policy*. Buckingham: Open University Press.



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