Student Social Work: What makes a good observation?

As a Practice Educator working currently with two local universities in supporting and assessing Student Social Workers, it is safe to say that I have completed my fair share of observations on budding professionals.

As such, a question I get asked a lot is “what makes a good observation?” Whilst there is no one formula there are certain focus points or key themes that Student Social Workers should incorporate if observations are to be assessed as “good”.

What are they I hear you say? Well below I have listed a number of key elements that I look out for as a Practice Educator, which should be included in all observations.

**Use the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) to decide what you should be observed doing!**

Social Work offers us the chance to engage with Service Users in lots of different ways. As such, Students can sometimes find it overwhelming when deciding which area of their practice they should be observed doing.

A good guide to use in deciding is to cross reference the PCF, whether first or final placement, against the proposed observation. The more PCF’s you are likely to achieve, the stronger the observation.

The most common observations are:

- One to One intervention sessions
- Group Sessions
- Multi-Agency Meetings
- Assessment Meetings
- Training Delivery

**PCF’s achieved:**

- Professionalism
- Professional Leadership
- Knowledge

**Preparation and planning**

All Social Work practice, whether arranging a contact session, undertaking an assessment or writing a care plan involves detailed and holistic preparation and planning.

Therefore, it is essential that students must demonstrate what planning they have undertaken prior to the observed session commencing. In doing so it will demonstrate how you have shown professional commitment by taking responsibility for the session and how you have adapted your practice to the needs of the Service User. To really demonstrate this, you can use a session
time planner. Completing this prior to the session will really strengthen the quality of the observation.

**PCF’s achieved:**
- Professionalism
- Professional Leadership

**Tailor the session to the needs of the Service User.**
As practitioners, we are taught to promote empowerment (where possible) when working with Service Users. As such, it is important that any session (observed or not) should be tailored to the needs of the Service Users.
Here you need to demonstrate how you have taken their learning needs, religion, culture, age, gender, race and ethnicity into consideration and how this has been adapted to meet their requirements. For example, there is no point completing a worksheet on anger control with a young person with limited reading and writing skills if the language and content is directed towards adults.

**PCF’s achieved:**
- Professionalism
- Values & Ethics
- Diversity
- Rights, Justice and Economic Wellbeing
- Critical Reflection and Analysis

**Link intervention delivery to assessment**
Highlight how the session has been planned with sight of the Service Users assessment. Consider questions such as:
- Why are you completing this piece of work?
- What areas (linked to assessment) will you focus on?
- What do you hope to achieve from the session?
By doing so, you are demonstrating the importance of linking assessment, planning, intervention delivery and review - All of which are essential ingredients for Social Work practice.

**PCF’s achieved:**
- Intervention and Skills
- Knowledge
- Critical Reflection and Analysis

**Demonstrate your listening, communication skills and person centred approach.**
The ‘buzz words’ of Social Work Practice but important nonetheless.
During the observation, demonstrate active listening and communication skills. The best way to do this is by using the technique of paraphrasing - repeating what the Service User has said for clarity and confirmation of understanding. In doing so, you are achieving and adopting a person centred approach to working, which promotes the use of empathy and unconditional positive regards.

**PCF’s achieved:**
- Rights, Justice and Economic Wellbeing
- Knowledge

**It won’t go 100% as planned**
Yes, it is essential in any observation that you must prepare in advance, as I have highlighted above. However, we must not lose sight to the fact that we deal with real life situations, which can often be fraught, challenging and complex. We deal with people in times of crisis or need. As such, it is rare that any session (no matter how long you’ve been qualified for) will go 100% as how you had planned.

However, do not worry about this. Some of the best observations I have conducted over the years have often been those where it hasn’t gone as planned. Therefore, Student have had to thing on their feet - demonstrating professional judgement and autonomous thinking. This is true Social Work, as often we are presented or ‘thrown’ into crisis situations whereby we are required to (somehow) make sense, assess and de-escalate a situation all at once.

**PFC’s achieved:**
- Knowledge
- Intervention and Skills
- Contexts and organisations

**Don’t lie - It’s ok not to know everything**
Sometimes Students anxiety can be related to the fact that they feel fearful if asked questions they do not yet know the answer to. Again, don’t worry about this.

The best response to use here is simply: “I’m sorry, I don’t know the answer to that question. But I shall make a note of it and will find out for you”.

This transparent approach will assist you in developing a better Client-Worker relationship. It will also demonstrate to the observer that you are not trying to 'wing it' and that you have conducted yourself in a professional manner.

**PFC’s achieved:**
- Knowledge
- Professionalism
- Professional Leadership
- Intervention and Skills
- Contexts and organisations
Observations are for learning

Finally, observations are for learning. We are all human and mistakes will be made. From an observers point of view there will always be learning following observations. The key here is to think critically and reflect with the observer - use it as two way process. This will again demonstrate your practice as a budding Social Worker.