

## **Video-Shorts: A simple and useful classroom based method for developing skills**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** The teaching and learning of skills in a classroom setting is often thought to require a resource intensive approach. **Purpose:** This study explores the impact of a relatively basic and short communication skills teaching session on postgraduate students' self-perception of their skills. **Methodology/Approach:** Data was gathered using a pre-teaching and post-teaching survey designed to enable students to evaluate their own sense of skill development. **Findings/Conclusions:** Students overwhelmingly found this teaching session helpful in terms of increasing their confidence and readiness to communicate on their first social work practice placement. **Implications:** Effective skills development can take place within the constraints of a classroom setting with few resources using a basic simulation within an experiential framework.

**Keywords:** experiential learning, social work education, skill development, simulation

## **Introduction**

Since 2013, social work students in England have been required to undertake a minimum of 200 days of skill development – usually called skill development days (SDDs). Most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England have adopted a model where 170 of these SDDs are allocated to practice placements and the remaining 30 days are ‘taught’ in classroom settings. Whilst there is ample literature indicating the importance of social work students developing skills for practice (e.g. Diggins, 2004; Trevithick, 2012) and evidence of educators using these days creatively (e.g. Bastin and Joubert, 2021), exactly which skills and how they should be taught remains unclear (Diggins, 2004; Dinham, 2006; Luckock et al., 2006; Mumm, 2006). Literature also reveals no systematic use of theoretical frameworks to support teaching of communication skills in England (Trevithick et al., 2004).

### ***Experiential learning***

We draw on Kolb's (2015) experiential learning as a theoretical framework and pedagogical approach for skill development. This theory views learning as a continuous process which involves 4 elements: 1) drawing information from an experience (concrete experience); 2) reflecting on that experience (reflective observation); 3) thinking through the experience using existing knowledge based on the reflections to develop new knowledge (abstract conceptualisation); and 4) trying out/applying the new knowledge through behaviour (active experimentation). According to this model, learning involves bringing together the opposing experiences of reflection and action, and thinking and feeling. All play a significant, joint role in the learning experience, which leads to transformation.

The theory is based upon 6 ‘propositions’ of learning as a process (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). First, the process should engage the learner as an active participant in their own learning. Second,

learning involves re-learning and un-learning what the learner brings to any situation. Third, it requires moving between opposing views, adaptations to or experiences of the world – action, reflection, thinking and feeling. Fourth, learning is more than just a cognitive process; it entails a holistic experience of thinking, feeling, perceiving and acting/behaving. Fifth, learning involves interaction with the environment. Finally, learning is about creating and constructing knowledge rather than gaining pre-defined objective knowledge (Kirkendall & Krishen, 2015; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Experiential learning is therefore a highly subjective and individual experience (Kayes, 2002). Empirical literature provides evidence of the benefits of this approach in the classroom setting, especially in an academic practice-based subject such as social work (Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2010; Stevens, 2015; Wehbi, 2011).

### ***Simulation and video recording***

The use of video recording simulated practice situations has a positive role in the development of skills (Bolger, 2014; Cartney, 2006; Koprowska, 2003; Rogers & Welch, 2009). Simulation, usually in the form of role play or skills practise, is not new in practice-based professional education; it is standard in medical schools and, increasingly, in North American social work programmes (Dodds et al., 2018; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). Students have found this approach to skill development to be helpful (Gillingham, 2008), which is perhaps unsurprising given the opportunity it provides for reflection and feedback to support the links between theory and practice (Asakura & Bogo, 2021). Locating the development of practice skills within the theoretical framework of experiential learning, with its requirement for skills demonstrated to be based on knowledge and values, is one way to avoid students being trained to simply perform skills (Wehbi, 2011). Pioneering work in North America has

evidenced that simulation, when thoughtfully planned and executed, results in holistic competence (Bogo et al., 2021).

### ***Summative and formative skills practise***

It is standard for educators to use both formative and summative feedback in assessment. The summative assessment of skills is arguably an area for development in English social work education because of the perception that the challenges involved, e.g. the time and resource required along with concerns about consistency and reliability of grading, are prohibitive, despite evidence to the contrary (e.g. Bogo et al., 2014; Domakin & Forrester, 2018). The perceived challenges of assessing skills summatively remain in England, and there is no regulatory expectation that social work programmes assess skills summatively in the classroom. The conflation of summative assessment and feedback in HEIs can overshadow the worth of formative feedback (Winstone & Boud, 2020). Formative feedback positively influences motivation and achievement (Cauley & McMillan, 2010; Leenknecht et al., 2021) and thus has its potential in the development of skills regardless of whether skills are also summatively assessed.

### ***Purpose of this study***

We explore the impact of a quick and easy-to-implement formative experiential teaching session on postgraduate students' readiness to communicate on their first placement and their confidence in using communication skills. There have been important developments exploring how to teach skills for example the use of skills labs (e.g. Cartney, 2006; Moss et al., 2007), but educators can lack the resources required for their implementation, especially the use of actors to play specific roles (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). In recognition of the time, resources and energy needed to set up a skills lab and/or a specific module on communication

skills takes, were interested in whether communication skills can be improved within only a 3-hour timescale in a standard classroom-teaching environment. We therefore developed and evaluated a method of video-shorts within an experiential learning framework.

## **Methods**

### ***Materials***

The video-short method provides a tool for developing communication skills. It builds on well-established methodologies from skills labs and communication-focused skills modules, but is not as resource-intensive as extant methods. The session requires the following resources/materials: a module convener, colleagues to take the role of a 'service user', a main classroom as a base, extra room(s) where interactions take place, video recording facilities with playback function and instruction and feedback handouts (see appendices).

### ***Procedures***

The recording and reviewing portion of the exercise takes 20 minutes per student on average, and requires one-on-one interaction with a 'service user'. Ideally, several colleagues need to be available to take the role of 'service user', then reviewer, to allow interactions to happen concurrently, thereby reducing the overall time needed. Each student should have their own room to use as an interactive space (a small office would suffice) to ensure privacy and adequate video sound quality. Exact number of 'servicer users' and rooms needed will be dependent on group size.

Our video-shorts session took place in week 6 of a 10-week SDD module, which aimed to build communication (and other) skills. The module was delivered in 3-hour blocks over a 10-week term. The week 5 session included preparation for the video-shorts. A previous session had also introduced Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 2015). Students were encouraged to consider the role of reflection on experience as a powerful way of learning from experience, with each of Kolb's 4 stages explored within small groups.

In the video-short session, students left the main teaching room for a separate room to practise the previously introduced skills with a 'service user' colleague. The encounter was video recorded. The prospect of this session understandably raised some anxieties for students. In order to minimise distress and facilitate honest and constructive self-evaluation, active care was taken to remind students the video recording would not be used for assessment purposes, that the module lead would not be shown the videos (which were deleted immediately after review), and their 'performance' in no way influenced the outcome of the module assessments.

A short scenario (Appendix 1) was given to the student and 'service user' as a starting prompt to initiate the interaction. Students were then expected to lead the interaction with the 'service user' and practise their skills. Efforts were made to standardise the experience as much as possible (Rogers & Welch, 2009) by using the same scenario in all interactions and ensuring the 'service user' was fully briefed and knew the skills that should be utilised. Immediately after the encounter, the student and colleague reviewed the film together, prompted by a short handout designed to help the student reflect on the encounter and the video of themselves using skills. Once the student returned to the main classroom, they were

given some reflection time to apply the Experiential Learning Cycle to their experience with a focus on how they would then take their learning into the 'active experimentation' stage.

### ***Design***

To evaluate the usefulness of this method, all students completing the video-shorts session in 3 different postgraduate cohorts over a 3-year period were invited to participate in the evaluation. Forty-five students responded, equating to a response rate of 93.75%.

A fully anonymised pre- and post-session survey (Appendix 4) collected data on the participants' age; perceived level of experience of communicating with people who use services; how ready they felt to communicate with service users during their upcoming first placement; and their confidence in using open/closed questions, non-verbal communication and active listening skills with service users. Surveys included both four-category, forced choice Likert-style questions (ranging from very inexperienced to very experienced; very unconfident to very confident) and open-ended questions where students were asked to reflect on the closed-ended responses they had provided. The post-session survey also included a question inviting participants to rate the usefulness of the session.

There was a small amount of missing data: two participants did not respond to pre-session confidence in active listening, and a second set of two participants did not respond to the post-session reflection on usefulness of the session. Given our very small sample size, we included these cases where we had valid data for them rather than losing them to listwise deletion. Additionally, there were 4 participants who wrote in a response (neutral) on some of the Likert-style questions rather than selecting from one of the provided categories. Because these ordinal measures are indicative of an underlying continuous construct (e.g. confidence), we treated these cases as valid indicators of where the participants placed



themselves on the underlying construct and left the data for these few cases unchanged. Such entries are labelled 'neutral' in the results below.

### ***Ethical approval***

Ethical approval was provided by the Faculty Ethics Review Committee at Lancaster University. Participants were provided with participant information sheets, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. All participants understood that the decision to participate had no bearing on their marks for the course, and that they had a right to refuse to participate or withdraw consent. The researchers had no way of knowing who had not participated in the evaluation as the data were fully anonymised.

### ***Analytic Strategy***

Data were analysed with Stata v.16. We produced descriptive statistics and graphic analyses to examine raw pre- and post-session scores across the skills domains we assessed. We also calculated change scores to understand whether students' evaluation of their skills increased, decreased, or remained the same before versus after the session. Cross-tabulations documented associations between age and/or experience and the communication skills domains. We used a Wilcoxon signed rank test to test for statistical significance in the change in self-rated skills before and after the videos. However, given the very small sample size, we interpret the statistical significance of our models with caution, and supplement these findings with qualitative evidence. Informed by our descriptive analysis of the closed-ended questions, we examined the open-ended responses to contextualize our results. Where students indicated a decline in their skills after the session, we examined open-ended responses to explore potential explanations. For each domain, we also looked at what participants with positive change scores reported in open-ended questions for each domain

before versus after the session to understand how they viewed their skills and their experience of the session.

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for participant characteristics (age and experience)

Variable	n	%	Std. Dev.
Age in Categories	45		
21-25	17	37.8%	0.49
26-30	10	22.2%	0.42
31-35	4	8.9%	0.29
36-40	7	15.6%	0.37
41-45	3	6.7%	0.25
46+	4	8.9%	0.29
Level of Experience	45		
Not at all experienced	7	15.6%	0.37
Somewhat inexperienced	11	24.4%	0.43
Neutral	2	4.4%	0.21
Somewhat experienced	17	37.8%	0.49
Very experienced	8	17.8%	0.39

Table 1 summarises the descriptive statistics for background characteristics of participants. Age was measured in categories to preserve anonymity, with 37.8% (n=17) in age range 21-25 and 22.2% aged 26-30. Fewer than half of the participants were over 30, with 15.6% (n=7) in the 36-40 age group and the remaining participants fairly evenly spread between the 31-35 (8.9%; n=4), 41-45 (6.7%; n=3), and 46+ (8.9%; n=4) age groups.

Just over half (55.6%) reported they were somewhat or very experienced, likely reflecting that participants were all postgraduate students, who likely have had more opportunities to gain relevant past experience. A small minority of participants (4.4%; n=2) rated themselves neutrally as neither experienced nor inexperienced, and the remaining 40% rated themselves somewhat or very inexperienced.

**Pre- and Post-Session Confidence and Readiness**

Table 2. Readiness and confidence outcomes before and after the video session

Variable	Pre-Session			Post-Session			Change Between Pre- vs. Post-Session			
	n	%	Std. Dev.	n	%	Std. Dev.	n	Mean	Std. Dev.	p-value
Readiness to Communicate	45			45			45	0.36	0.72	<0.001
Not at all ready	3	6.7%	0.25	2	4.4%	0.21	--	--	--	--
Somewhat unready	11	24.4%	0.43	4	8.9%	0.29	--	--	--	--
Neutral	2	4.4%	0.21	0	0.0%	0.00	--	--	--	--
Somewhat ready	24	53.3%	0.50	28	62.2%	0.49	--	--	--	--
Completely ready	5	11.1%	0.32	11	24.4%	0.43	--	--	--	--
Confidence Open & Closed Questions	45			45			45	0.13	0.73	0.09
Not confident at all	0	0.0%	0.00	1	2.2%	0.15	--	--	--	--
Somewhat unconfident	4	8.9%	0.29	3	6.7%	0.25	--	--	--	--
Somewhat confident	34	75.6%	0.43	27	60.0%	0.50	--	--	--	--
Completely confident	7	15.6%	0.37	14	31.1%	0.47	--	--	--	--
Confidence Non-Verbal Methods	45			45			45	0.53	0.84	<0.001
Not confident at all	2	4.4%	0.21	0	0.0%	0.00	--	--	--	--
Somewhat unconfident	9	20.0%	0.40	3	6.7%	0.25	--	--	--	--
Somewhat confident	29	64.4%	0.48	23	51.1%	0.51	--	--	--	--
Completely confident	5	11.1%	0.32	19	42.2%	0.50	--	--	--	--
Confidence Active Listening	43			45			43	0.22	0.83	<0.05
Not confident at all	1	2.3%	0.15	0	0.0%	0.00	--	--	--	--
Somewhat unconfident	9	20.9%	0.41	8	17.8%	0.39	--	--	--	--
Neutral	0	0.0%	0.00	1	2.2%	0.15	--	--	--	--
Somewhat confident	24	55.8%	0.50	20	44.4%	0.50	--	--	--	--
Completely confident	9	20.9%	0.41	16	35.6%	0.48	--	--	--	--

Table 2 provides cross-tabulations for participants' pre-session and post-session self-ratings of their readiness to communicate and confidence with open and closed questions, non-verbal methods, and active listening. The table also presents mean change scores in each domain, which capture within-participant change in self-ratings before and after the session. Over one-third (35.5%; n=16) of participants rated themselves neutral, somewhat unready, or not at all ready to communicate before the session. Only 13.3% (n=6) rated themselves somewhat or not at all ready after the session. While only 11.1% (n=5) said they were completely ready before the session, nearly one-quarter (24.4%; n=11) said they were completely ready to communicate after the session. Just over half (53.5%; n=24) indicated they were somewhat ready prior to the session, rising to 62.2% (n=28) after the session. As the change score of 0.36 ( $p < 0.001$ ) indicates, on average participants' ratings of their readiness increased by more than one-third of a point before versus after the session.

Compared to readiness to communicate, participants were more confident in their use of open and closed questions at baseline. While 6.7% said they were not at all ready to communicate, none of the participants said they were not confident at all with their use of open and closed questions. Only 8.9% (n=4) said they were somewhat unconfident, while over three-quarters (75.6%; n=34) said they were somewhat confident and 15.6% (n=7) said they were completely confident. Although one participant did move into the 'not confident at all' category after the session, overall we found that more students did express complete confidence after the activity. Only 6.7% (n=3) rated themselves somewhat unconfident after the session, while 60% (n=27) said they were somewhat confident and 31.1% (n=14) said they were completely confident after the session. The within-participant change score (0.13) was more modest in this domain compared to readiness to communicate, but still positive. The

change was also non-significant ( $p=0.09$ ). The high baseline confidence may help to explain the more modest change score in this domain.

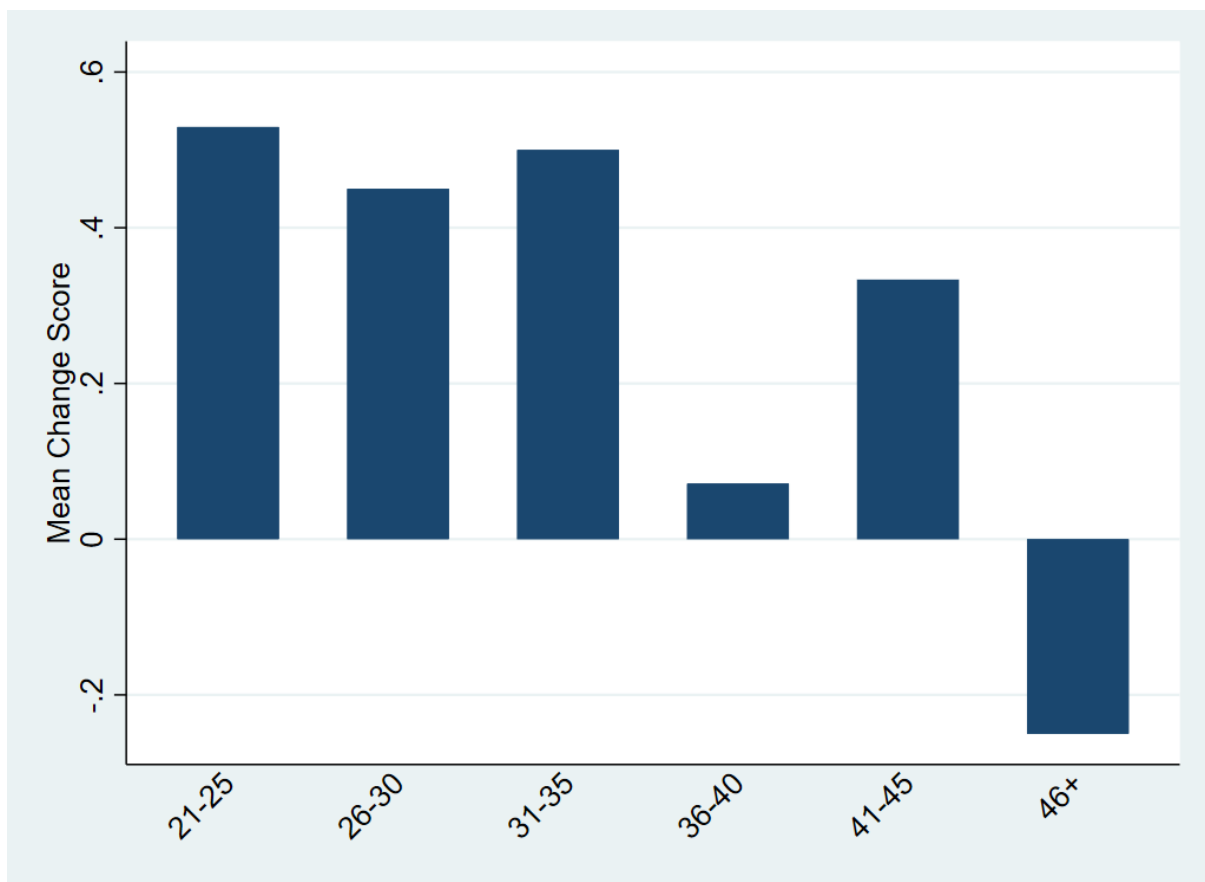
The third domain in Table 2 is confidence with non-verbal methods. Nearly one-quarter of participants rated themselves not confident at all (4.4%;  $n=2$ ) or somewhat unconfident (20%;  $n=9$ ). A further 64.4% ( $n=29$ ) rated themselves somewhat confident, while only 11.1% ( $n=5$ ) said they were completely confident with non-verbal methods. No participants said they were not at all confident after the session, and only 6.7% ( $n=3$ ) rated themselves somewhat unconfident. Over half (51.1%;  $n=23$ ) rated themselves somewhat confident, and a large minority (42.2%;  $n=19$ ) rated themselves completely confident following the session. This domain saw the largest change score (0.53;  $p<0.001$ ), with more than a half-point mean increase in participants' rating of their confidence after the session compared to baseline.

The final domain was confidence with active listening. Nearly one-quarter of participants rated themselves not confident at all (2.3%;  $n=1$ ) or somewhat unconfident (20.9%;  $n=9$ ) to begin. Over three-quarters rated themselves somewhat (55.8%;  $n=24$ ) or completely confident (20.9%;  $n=9$ ). After the session, no participants rated themselves not confident at all, 17.8% ( $n=8$ ) were somewhat unconfident, and 2.2% ( $n=1$ ) rated themselves neutral. The remaining participants rated themselves somewhat (44.4%;  $n=20$ ) or completely confident (35.6%;  $n=16$ ). Again, we found a more modest but still positive change score (0.22;  $p<0.05$ ), likely partly reflecting the higher baseline confidence in this domain.

### ***Associations of Readiness and Confidence with Age and Experience***

We next examined how confidence and readiness were distributed across age and experience.

*Figure 1. Change in readiness to communicate by age*



Turning first to readiness to communicate, Figure 1 shows mean change scores within each age category. There was an improvement in readiness to communicate following the session for all but the 46+ age group. Improvements were greatest for 21-25 year old and 31-35 year old participants, with more modest gains for 36-40 year olds. This negative mean score was driven by a single participant who rated themselves as somewhat ready before the session but not at all ready after the session (a two-point decline). We examined their open-ended response, but this did not provide any insight to the reported decline. Only one other

participant in the data reported a decline in readiness following the session, from somewhat unready to not at all ready. This participant explained “I feel I have good communication skills but little experience.” While the session substantially improved readiness to communicate on average, a very small minority of participants did feel a decline in their readiness after completing the session.

*Figure 2. Readiness to communicate by self-rated level of experience*

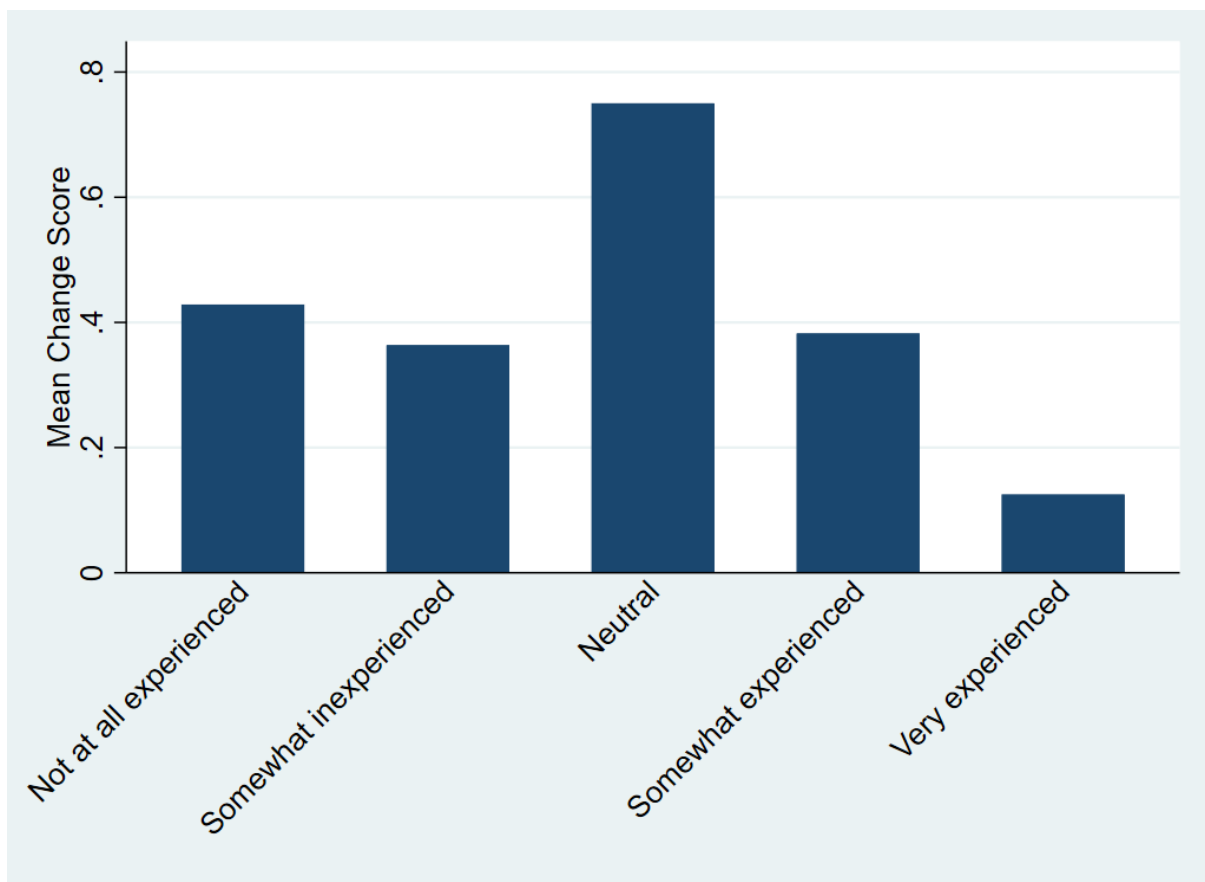


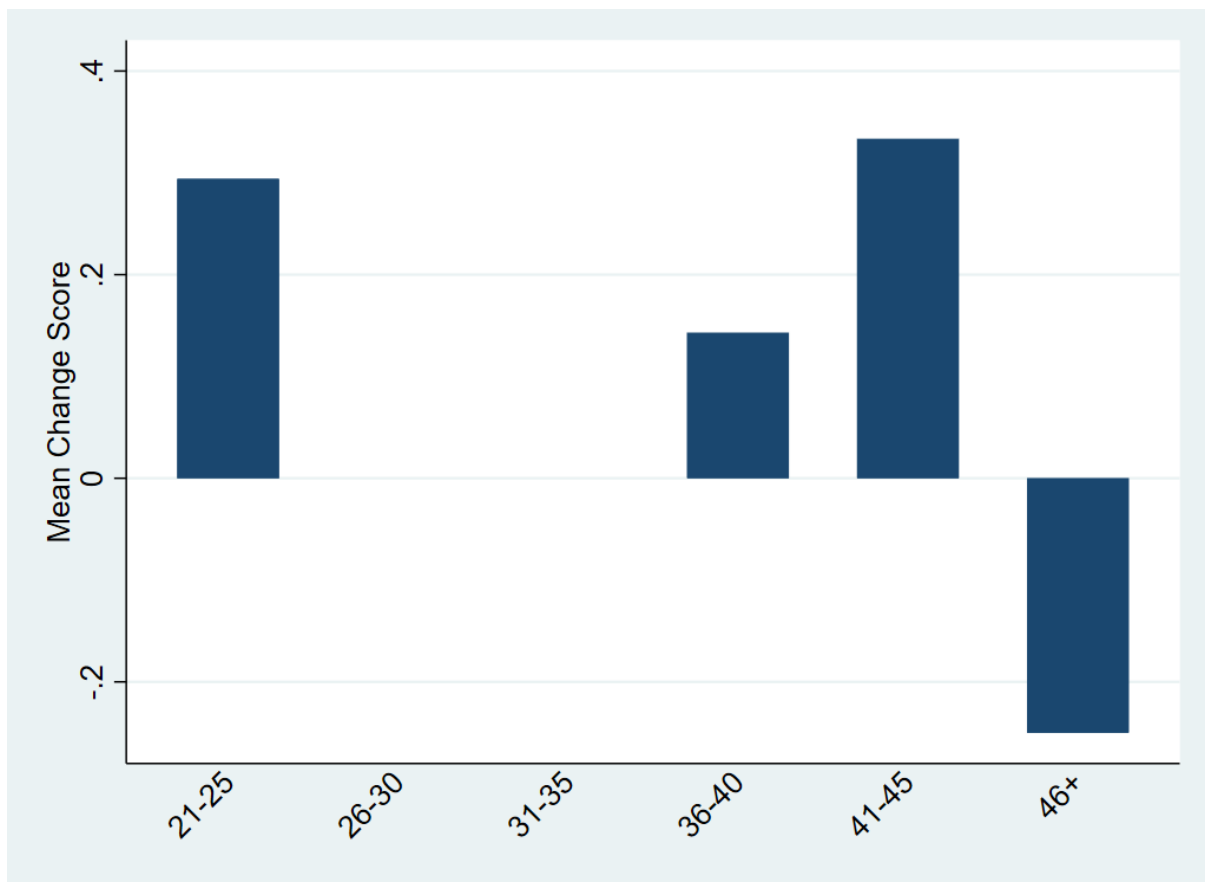
Figure 2 provides results for change in the same domain disaggregated by experience. The most experienced group made the smallest gains from the session, but all groups reported a mean increase in their readiness to communicate. While the neutral group appears to have made substantially greater gains than the other groups, only two participants rated themselves in this category. Of the two participants who reported a decline in readiness, the



first reported being somewhat experienced, while the second rated themselves not at all experienced.

We also looked at the open-ended responses participants with scores that improved to understand why they reported an improvement. Before the video-short, these participants mentioned either a lack of real-life experience (e.g. "I have little experience and feel quite anxious") or a time gap since they had put extant skills to use (e.g. "I have not been in practice for 12 months so I'm feeling a little rusty"). After the session, all but one of these participants specifically reported feeling more confident in their skills (the exception stated "I feel I need more experience and knowledge to be completely ready"). For example, pre-session one participant said: "There is some trepidation as I am not yet sure what area I will be involved in regarding my placement and therefore the range of service users I will be communicating with is unclear at this stage." After the session, however, this participant said: "I realised that my communication skills are much better than I gave myself credit for." Another participant said they "Had no experience of working with service users before, not sure what to say/do/relative to them" prior to the session, but after the session reported "My experience was very positive, I had more skills than I originally thought. My confidence has increased."

Figure 3 Confidence with open and closed questions by age



Confidence with open and closed questions showed the smallest change score overall. Figure 3 shows while 21-25 year olds, 36-40 year olds, and 41-45 year olds saw an increase in this domain, change scores for the 26-30 and 31-35 age groups averaged to zero. Meanwhile the 46+ group saw a decline in this domain. In total, there were 5 participants with a negative change score. All but one mentioned already feeling that they had some professional knowledge/experience in this area and so did not make substantial gains through the session. The fifth participant with a negative change score, aged 26-30, said “I am a bit confident with regards asking questions (both open and closed). I also believe that with more practice on my own and when I go on placement I will be completely confident.” These results suggest, rather than experiencing an erosion in skills following the session, this participant reflected on the session and identified a need for further independent study and experience.

Figure 4 Confidence with open and closed questions by experience

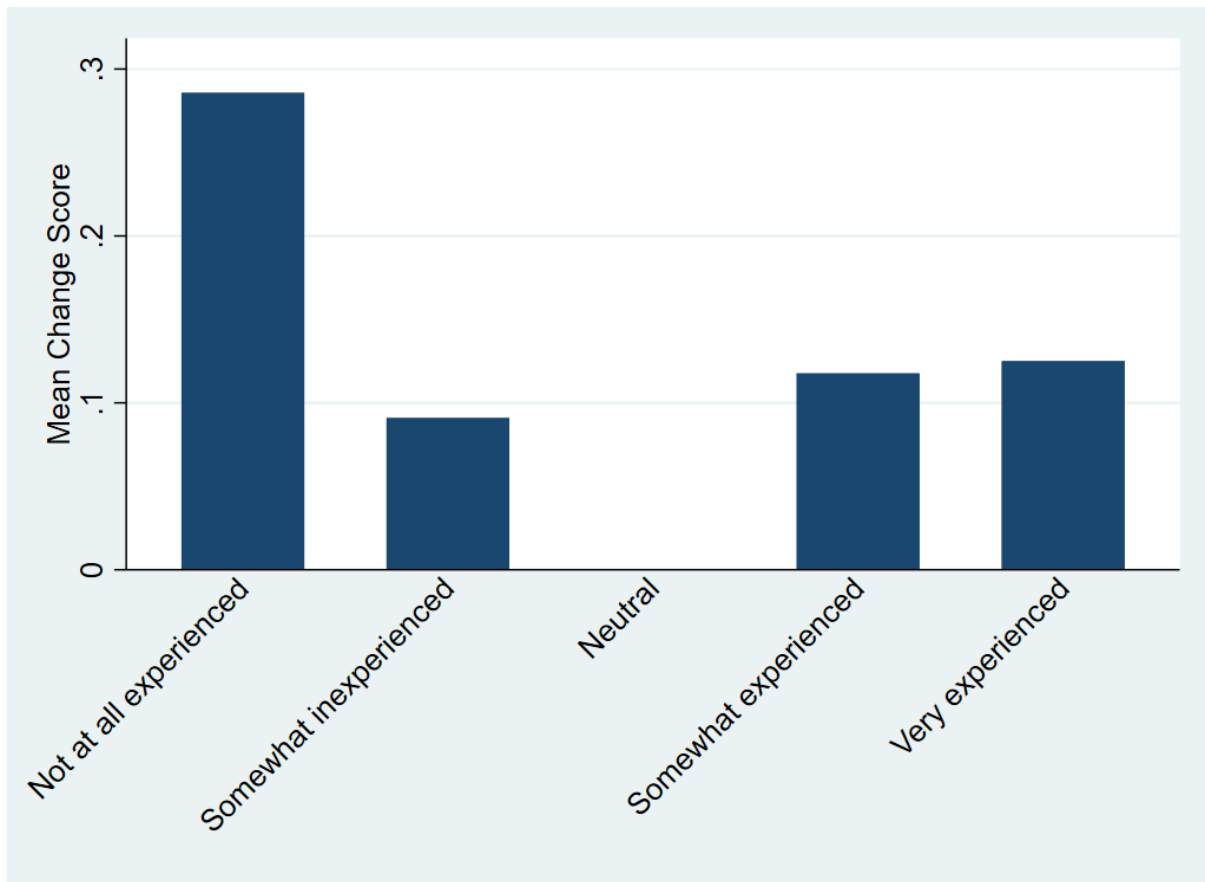
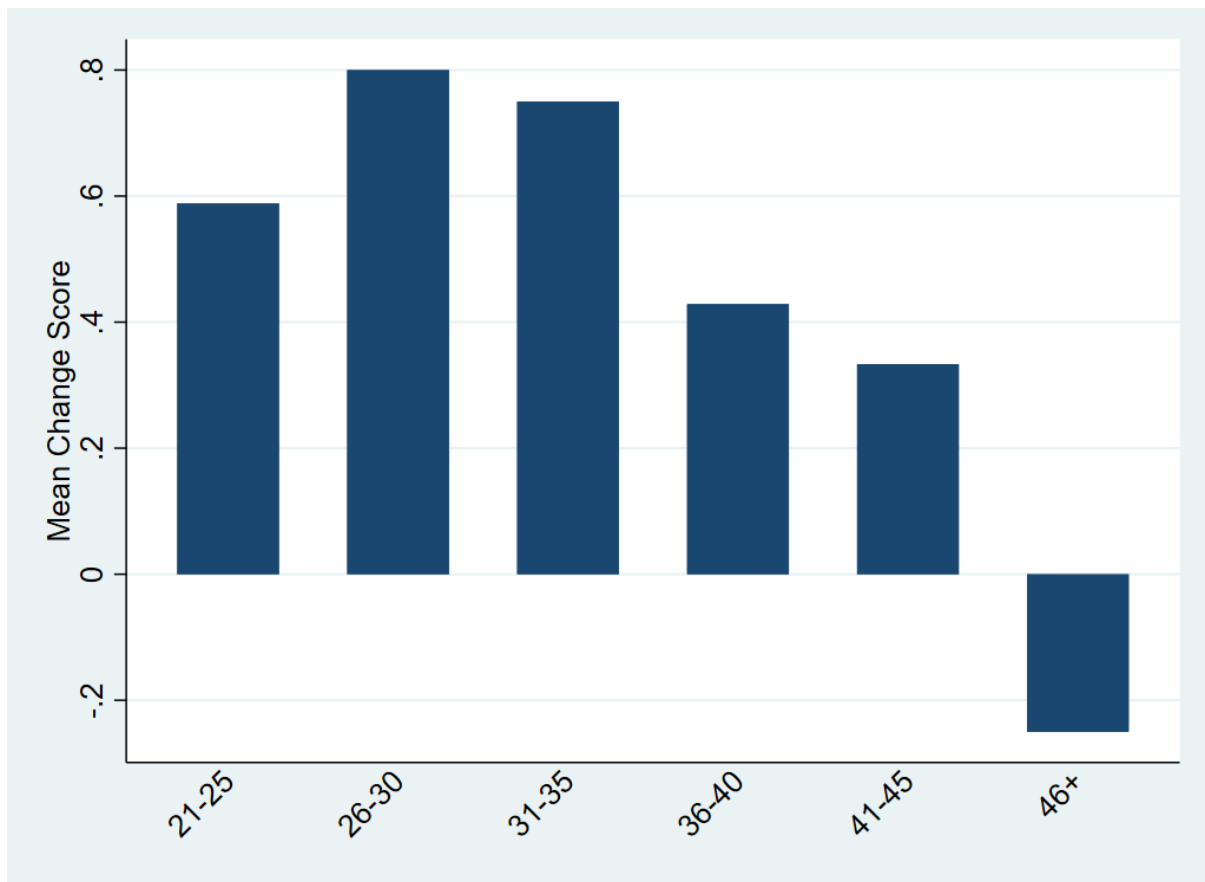


Figure 4 shows those rating themselves not at all experienced gained the most from the session, with a mean increase of over one-quarter of a point following the session. All remaining groups except for those rating their experience neutral reported an increase in confidence in this domain, but these increases were more modest compared to the least experienced participants. This pattern is consistent with references to existing experience and knowledge made by participants with negative change scores in the open-ended responses. Most participants whose scores improved reported having some level of previous skills and confidence in this domain prior to the session, but also frequently reported the session improved confidence, including by providing further evidence for their existing feelings of domain-specific adeptness. For example, prior to the session one participant said ‘I am used to using these questions in my job but the nerves of my first placement might throw me off.’

After completing the session, they noted “I felt good before and still do.” A small group who were not as confident before the session also reported an improvement after the session. One participant said “I am only somewhat confident as I may be placed in an unfamiliar setting...” prior to the session, but reported “I was better at this than I thought which has alleviated concerns” after the session.

*Figure 5 Confidence with non-verbal methods by age*



As Figure 5 shows, all but the oldest age group experienced an increase in confidence with non-verbal methods following the session, with the youngest three groups experiencing more than a half-point increase each on average. Open-ended comments from across the participant group indicate that the opportunity to view themselves using non-verbal skills was especially helpful, for example “session reassured me that I make good eye contact, body

language and affirming motions” and “I think I was able to demonstrate effectively how to use non-verbal communication. I was surprised by how much I do use it and not realise”.

Despite this highly positive pattern, we again found a mean decrease for the 46+ group. This negative score was driven by one participant, whose open-ended comment indicated they felt self-conscious in trying to convey a message with body language.

*Figure 6 Confidence with non-verbal methods by experience*

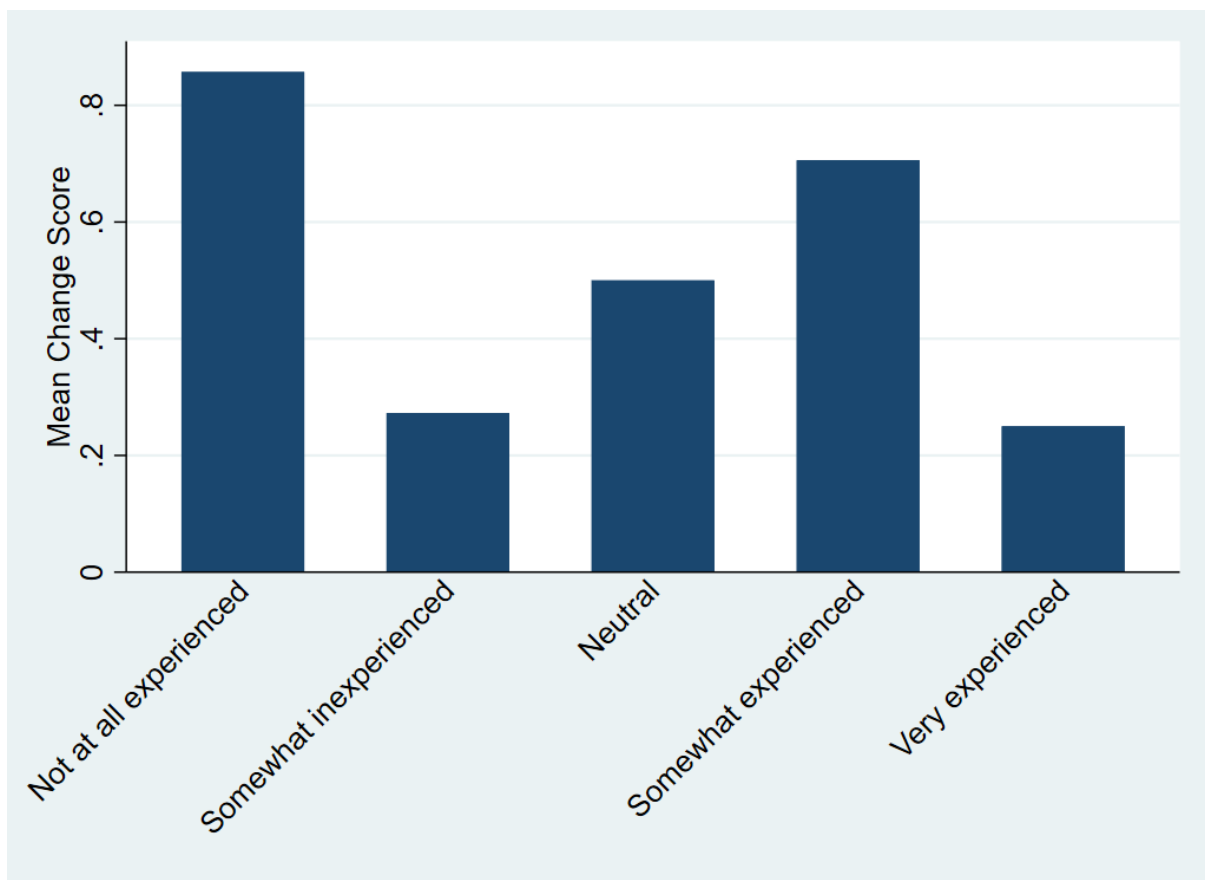


Figure 6 shows the group reporting the highest increase in their confidence in using non-verbal skills were those who assessed themselves having no experience (gaining nearly a full point), although all participants regardless of experience indicated an increase in confidence in this skill. Participants’ open-ended comments suggest, out of all domains, non-verbal was the area they felt most concerned about initially. Of the three participants with negative

change scores in this domain, two said they were somewhat inexperienced, and the third, who commented above on subliminal messages in body language, rated themselves somewhat experienced.

Pre-session open-ended responses from participants with a positive change score in this domain show many participants felt less confident in this domain due to personal reflections (e.g. "I know that my body language can sometimes give away my emotions... I am working on my poker face") or comments from others (e.g. "from what I have been told, sometimes my expressions do not exactly reflect how I feel"). Several mentioned having previous experience but feeling out of practice (e.g. "a little rusty") or not yet as confident as they would like (e.g. "getting there... when I get nervous I can be more closed off and appear 'cold' or offhand"). After the session, participants identified positive aspects of their body language and non-verbal skills they observed watching the video, with many reporting an increase in confidence and even surprise at their own aptitude after viewing the video. For instance, one participant who had said pre-session "I am aware that I forget about my body language during the conversations and have to remind myself constantly" reported after the session that "My body language was much better than I expected."

Another user said before the session:

I think this is another area of communication that I practice sub-consciously I know what kind of body language is inappropriate when talking to service users such as crossing arms, avoiding eye contact and turning away from someone when they are speaking. I hope in practice this comes across.

This participant was nonetheless pleasantly surprised by their use of these skills in their video: "I was surprised how well in the task that I came across in terms of body language. This has

made me feel more confident about how I come across to service users.” Overall, some participants stated existing confidence in this domain had been bolstered by participation in the session; meanwhile, those who reported uncertainty about their skills in this domain reported greater confidence after the session.

*Figure 7 Confidence using active listening by age*

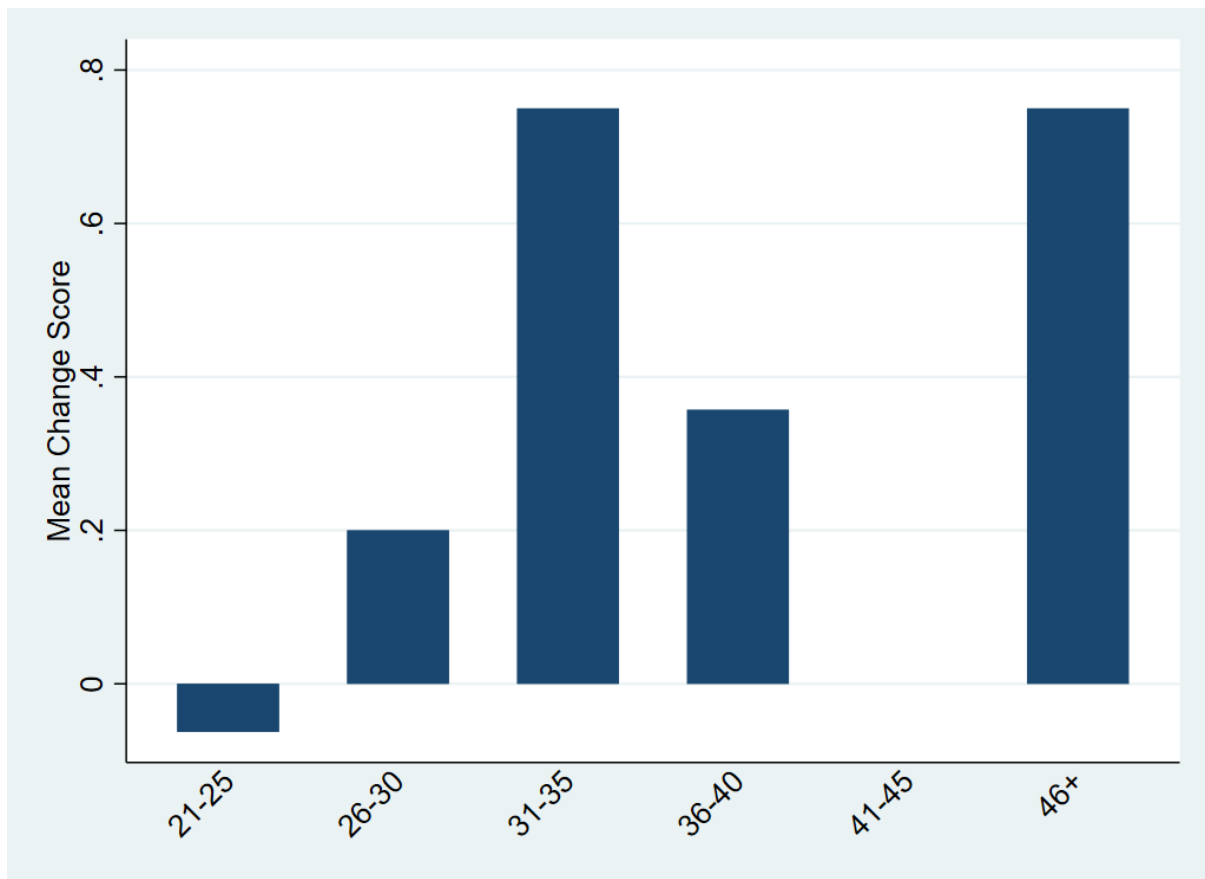


Figure 7 shows there was a slight reduction in confidence in use of active listening for age category 21-25, and no change on average for age category 41-45, but a positive increase of scores for the remaining age categories, with 31-35 and 46+ showing the most increased change in confidence. This was the only domain in which the 46+ group saw an increase following the session, and the increase was substantial—around three-quarters of a point on average. It was also the only domain in which 21-25 year olds saw a decline. Four participants in the 21-25 group had a negative change score, with three of these mentioning in open-

ended responses that they were already using the skills in this domain or felt these skills were part of everyday life. The fourth noted “Through Jane’s explanation it is now clearer how to repeat what a service user is trying to relay.” It is puzzling why the participant reported a decline in confidence. One additional participant, aged 36-40, also had a negative change score in this domain, and, similar to the younger age group, reported feeling they were already using these skills.

*Figure 8 Confidence using active listening by experience*

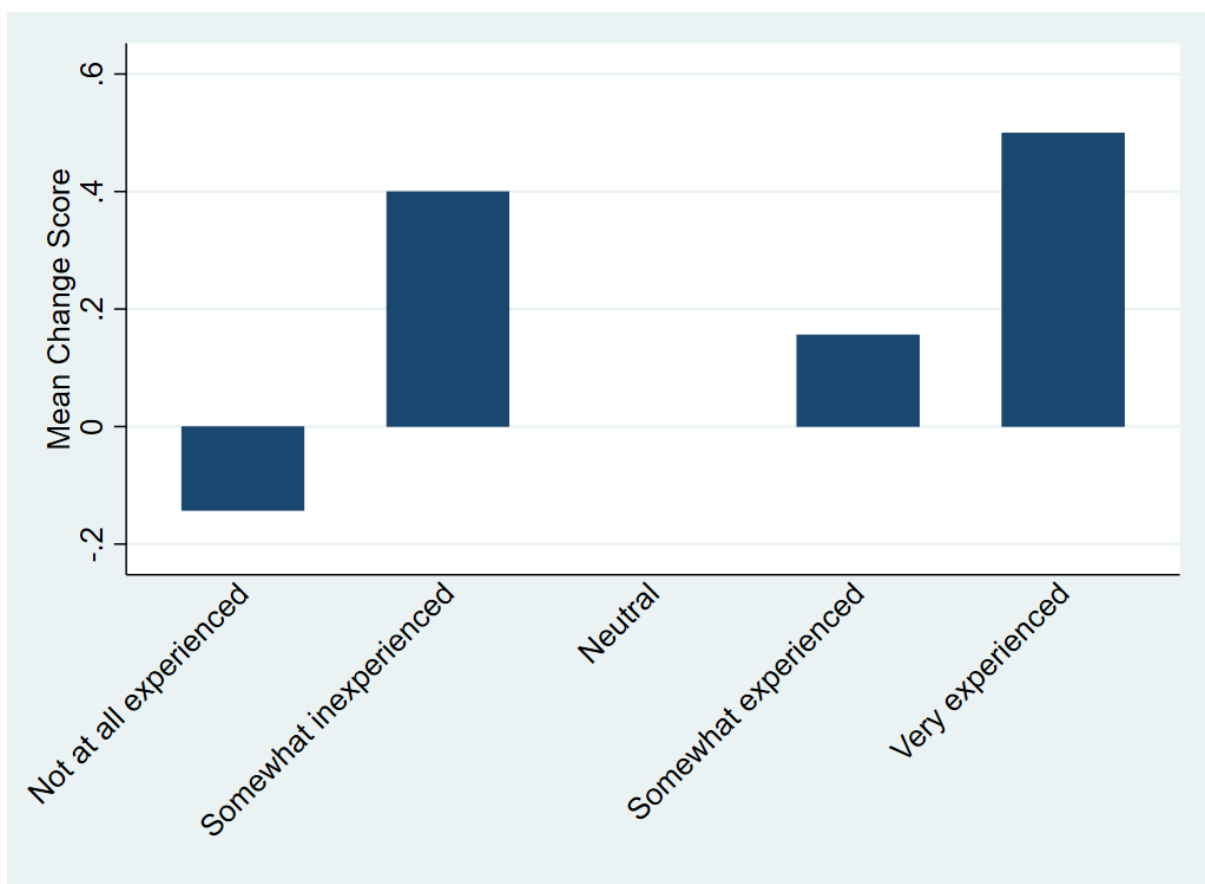


Figure 8 provides the results for confidence using active listening by experience. Participants who rated themselves not at all experienced had a reduction in their mean scores, whilst other categories either held steady or saw an increase in confidence. Although participants in the 21-25 age category who had negative change scores spoke about their existing experience and knowledge in this domain, nearly all of them placed themselves in the least experienced



group. By contrast, the participant in the 36-40 age group with a negative change score in this domain rated themselves very experienced.

Pre-session open-ended responses from participants with a positive change score in this domain were mixed. Most said they had some experience with active listening skills, but felt unsure of or unhappy with their skill level in this domain (e.g. "I am unsure I will be able to remember all the techniques whilst listening to the service users issues"), while a small minority did not feel they had sufficient knowledge/experience in this domain (e.g. "I only had my first ALS yesterday")<sup>1</sup>. A large minority felt they already had a good baseline of skills in this area, but were interested in developing further. After the session, several participants who were unsure of/unhappy with their own skill level identified specific areas for improvement, but also mentioned feeling confident. One said "I may be conscious of whether I'm listening and showing congruence and validation or whether I'm too busy thinking 'do I look interested?'" before the session, and noted "Will be practising using silence but other than that, confident in all aspects. Will be practising silence to make sure it's something more natural" after the session. The closed- and open-ended response together suggest that participants with a very low baseline were (unsurprisingly) unable to fully develop confidence in this domain from one session, but may still have learned from the session and identified an important area for further training. Those who reported good baseline skills before the session typically reported an increase in confidence following the session. For example, one participant said "I was already someone confident about this. The opportunity to practise this and get good feedback increased my confidence" following the session.

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<sup>1</sup>Referring to Action Learning Sets (ALS), a method of skill development outside the module.

## ***Helpfulness of the Session***

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for helpfulness of the session

Variable	n	%	Std. Dev.
Helpfulness of the session	43		
Very unhelpful	1	2.3%	0.15
Somewhat unhelpful	0	0.0%	0.00
Somewhat helpful	6	14.0%	0.35
Very helpful	36	83.7%	0.37

After the session, participants were asked to rate the session's helpfulness on a 4-point scale ranging from very unhelpful to very helpful. As shown in Table 3, the vast majority (83.7%; n=36) rated the session very helpful, and 14% (n=6) rated the session somewhat helpful; overall, 97.7% found the session helpful, providing strong evidence that this method is useful. No participants rated the session somewhat unhelpful, and only one rated the session very unhelpful. We examined the corresponding open-ended response:

Having a camera in my face was very uncomfortable and meant I could only see the eyes of the 'service user'. Therefore, I couldn't read anything from their facial expressions and because they were holding the iPad there were no changes in body language. So it wasn't a good test of how my communication skills are in a social work setting as I didn't have much to respond to.

This response highlights that, while the content of the session was overwhelmingly useful to participants, physical aspects of the setting, including camera position, can strongly influence the experience for some participants.

Although some participants reported a decline in confidence and/or readiness in some domains, their views of the session's helpfulness were nonetheless overwhelmingly positive. To better understand what participants found useful, we examined the open-ended responses for participants who rated the session highly. Four main themes emerged.

First, participants said the videos are valuable because they enable students to view themselves and reflect on how service users might see them. One participant noted "It was useful to see on video how I come across and was a good affirmation that I am quite good at this." Another participant similarly noted "Seeing myself in the situation has allowed me to know what I am good at, making me feel more confident in my abilities as I know I can do it."

Second, participants felt the video and reflective element work well together because the reflection prompted them to think carefully about the specific skills they are meant to be focusing on as they review themselves in action. One participant said they "Loved being able to watch myself back and discuss strategies/identify when silences happen and why." A second participant called the session a "Really good exercise in viewing verbal and non-verbal skills," elaborating that they were "able to critically look at how I could improve but a great boost for me to see I possess some good communication skills."

Third, although some participants experienced some self-doubt or anxiety about the video format before beginning the session, even nervous participants generally ended up seeing the value in the exercise. For example:

Despite being very nervous (and I hate listening to my voice on a recording) I felt that it allowed me to have a 'taste' of what it is like to working with people whilst in the 'role' of a social worker. I definitely have areas on which to work and so I can work on these throughout my course/placements.

Finally, even where students felt they had identified areas for improvement, this was generally seen as useful rather than as demoralizing, as highlighted by quotes from two participants:

Looking back to before the session, I was overconfident, thinking that because I had experience doing this that I was excellent at it. The process has shown me where I can improve but in a constructive way. I know the areas I should focus on, but don't feel that my confidence/self-esteem has been damaged.

Great to get feedback and realise I already do lots of the things I was worried about whether I do. Good to get guidance on areas to work on. I definitely will be trying those things out. Thank you, this has been a really valuable and helpful exercise. I'd like to repeat it sometime to see how I've incorporated the learning.

Overall, evidence from the open-ended responses strongly corroborated findings from the change scores suggesting improvements across skill domains associated with participation in the session, particularly readiness to communicate and confidence with non-verbal methods.

## **Discussion**

This paper evaluated a method of teaching using video-shorts to support the development of social work students' communication skills. The method involved a short interaction with a social work colleague simulating someone using services. The interaction was video recorded and the student had the opportunity to play back the video immediately in order to reflect on

their use of communication skills. This pedagogical approach is not widely used in social work programmes in England, due in part to perceived difficulties related to resources and a lack of clarity about what skills to focus on developing. This study demonstrates that there is significant value in this approach, which can be implemented with minimal resources. The video-shorts provided a powerful learning tool for participants. The video-shorts were not assessed and were entirely for the benefit of the participants' own self-evaluation and reflection. Participants found being able to view themselves, whilst reflecting on their use of skills, contributed to their self-analysis in a way that helped confirm the skills they already had and identify development needs. Our findings indicate that participants found the session helpful, and that, following the session, generally participants felt more ready to communicate on placement and more confident in using open and closed questions, non-verbal methods, and active listening skills. It is worth noting that this method was especially useful in developing confidence in using non-verbal skills, possibly because of the opportunity it provided for participants to visually assess themselves in a way that is very difficult without the use of a video recording.

Our results show variations within the different age and experience categories. Overall, younger participants and those with less experience generally reported greater positive development and generally older participants and those with more experience reported more modest improvements or even declines. However, active listening did not follow this pattern. Active listening is comprised of "*reflection, paraphrasing, clarification, summarization, open-ended questioning*" (Rogers and Welch, 2009, p.156). Given that there are several specific components to active listening and that it is not a term commonly used outside of professional settings, it is a less familiar skill than non-verbal and open and closed questions. Despite the participants being 'taught' active listening skills prior to the video-short, a

reduction in confidence in the youngest age and the least experienced groups could be linked to their relative lack of opportunity to have come across active listening in their life prior to joining their social work programme. This is an example of the lack of clarity about what social work communication skills *are* and what they involve (Diggins, 2014).

Our results align with evidence that the relationship between age and experience and successful progression through social work programmes is unclear (Holmström & Taylor, 2008). Whilst it may seem that younger and less experienced participants may have developed their readiness and confidence most in some areas, this is far from conclusive; the pattern was neither perfectly linear nor uniform across domains. Further disaggregation of the role of age and experience in the development of skills is required across social work educational research to confidently assess this relationship. This is particularly important when the framework of experiential learning is utilised, with its proposition that past experience is relevant to current learning. Any future work that does explore the relationship of age and experience must avoid assuming that experience and age are synonymous; we found no relationship between older participants stating they had the most experience and younger participants stating they had the least.

Rare as they were among our participants, reductions in confidence should not necessarily be considered cause for concern. Given that experiential learning was used as a framework for this video-short method, this reduction in perceived confidence levels could be explained by the deep reflection of the experience that is prompted by the cycle. It is understandable that students may have concluded they have more work to do to develop their readiness for communicating on placement and their confidence in using communication skills. Importantly, with a single exception, even participants who reported a reduction in

confidence rated the session as being somewhat or very helpful. Indeed, as the aim of the session is skills development, identifying areas for further improvement is a useful outcome, even where this realization may not build confidence initially.

### ***Conclusions***

This study introduced a method of video-shorts for building social work communication skills. Drawing on data from students' own reports of their readiness and confidence with these skills, we found that this simple method, which requires few resources to implement, was a helpful tool for building confidence and ensuring students are ready for placement. A key strength is the evidence that inclusion of this video-short method into a module will have a positive impact on student's communication skill development. This is especially so in relation to the use of non-verbal communication skills which saw the strongest positive developmental change. A further strength is the use of experiential learning as a framework to provide a structured process for students to consider their experience. This framework promotes a deep evaluation of the learning experience thus avoiding an oversimplistic experiential learning approach (Heinrich & Green, 2020). This helps prevent students simply assessing their skills from a performative stance. Because this framework encouraged students to actively consider how they would take any learning forward, the focus of the video-short session is developmental rather than summative, which prevented any anxieties associated with assessment or grading being a barrier to genuine learning. This method has application for learning from a range of disciplines, not just social work.

Several recommendations emerge from this study. First, it is essential to ensure students have a solid grounding in experiential learning prior to recording the video-shorts. The opportunity for reflection is a vital component of the exercise. Second, on a practical level, ensuring rooms

are well set up will ensure that students can get the most from the session. This includes both ensuring the facilitator and student can sit comfortably and see one another while the recording device is set up, and that there is sufficient privacy in the room to ensure students will not feel self-conscious. Third, it is important to verify that anyone helping with the session is comfortable using the technology involved. Finally, it would be valuable for the role of past experience and age of students in developing communication skills to be a research focus in the future.

### ***Limitations***

To assess the utility of this teaching method, we relied on students' self-reports of their sense of readiness for placement and confidence in using the skills practised. However, increasing confidence and a sense of readiness does not necessarily equate to students being more effective in their use of skills when they are in practice. Self-efficacy - the belief one has that they are able to achieve (Bandura, 1997) - overlaps with self-confidence, which was the measure we used in this study. Self-efficacy has, at best, an unclear relationship with the development of skills and in fact, there is evidence of a negative relationship in postgraduate students (Tompsett *et al.*, 2017). However, the activity of self-assessment appears to have some importance when assessing vocational competence (Gijbels, 2011) more broadly than social work. There is also evidence of a positive relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance (Baartman & Ruijs, 2011), evidence of a relationship between self-efficacy and future behaviours (Holden *et al.*, 2002) and a connection between confidence and self-development (Bolger, 2014). Self-efficacy has been used in important studies about developing specialist communication skills (for example Lefevre, 2015) despite the acknowledgement that there is not necessarily a causal or predictive relationship between self-efficacy and future skills.



A related limitation is that the teaching session evaluated here was formative – there was no assessment attached to it and therefore no opportunity to assess any correlation between the students self-assessed sense of readiness and confidence and their demonstrable skills. Students may find it difficult to objectively assess themselves, and could rate their ‘performance’ when watching back the recording rather than the actual skills used (Rogers & Welch, 2009). It should also be noted that all participants were postgraduate students and it might be that repeating the same activity with undergraduate students produces different results.

A further limitation is that this study did not call upon experts by experience or actors to play the role of ‘service users’. There is evidence confirming the value of experts by experience working in partnership with social work educators in practice simulation activities (Moss et al., 2007; Skilton, 2011). This would have been the ideal scenario, and a sense of discomfort is always present when others are asked to ‘play’ ‘service users’ in classroom settings. However, one of the aims of this piece of work was to ‘test out’ the value of a basic session that required as little resource as possible to see what could be achieved. On that basis, the teaching session does appear to have been successful. Nonetheless, where educators have the capacity to involve experts by experience in delivery of the session, to do so will provide added value to an already useful session.

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## Appendix 1 – Instructions and scenario

### Week 6 – Skills Practise

#### **What skills should you aim to practice?**

Last week we spent the whole session exploring communication including some short, informal opportunities to practise some techniques

In this session, you should be able to put into practice your skills in -

- Verbal communication
- Non-verbal communication
- Active listening
- Use of silences
- Open and closed questions

I am particularly keen that you aim to practise active listening as we spent quite some time last week exploring how creating and holding a ‘space’ with a service user is an ethical non-directive way to enable service users to find their own answers/solutions to difficulties which is the essence of person-centred practice. This will require you to avoid giving answers to the service users’ dilemma – which is not always easy for any social worker!

#### **The scenario**

Imagine that you are working with an adult who describes him/herself as alcohol dependant. You have a long term positive working relationship with this person. S/he has just received a letter informing them that they have finally got a place in a support group after being on the waiting list for months. However, the service user has now got some worries about attending the group and has asked to see you to talk them through.

#### **What will happen –**

- You will go into the room where your ‘service user’ in i.e a person you will have a conversation with is
- You will both prepare to start the video recording
- Your ‘service user’ will start the conversation – you will join in and have a go at practising your skills wherever you can
- When your conversation is over, you will watch your conversation back with your ‘service user’
- Whilst watching the video back, your ‘service user’ will prompt you to think about the skills that you used



## **Appendix 2 – Feedback discussion prompt**

Capture your immediate reflections here....

What do you notice about yourself in terms of your verbal communication?

What about your non-verbal communication?

Where you able to use active listening skills (confirmations, reflecting back, paraphrasing, summarising)?

How about use of silences?

Did you use open and closed questions?

Overall, what would you like to develop in terms of your communication skills?

What are your strengths in terms of communication?

## **Appendix 3 – Learning from experience**

Describe your experience

Reflect on your experience

(What was it like for you? What was comfortable/uncomfortable? How did you feel? What went well? What did you enjoy? What surprised you? What were you thinking?)

Generalise your experience

(Draw conclusions from your experience – what can you learn about yourself from this? What can you unlearn about yourself? What have you learnt about communication skills?)

Apply

(Where might you apply this new found knowledge that you have self-generated from your experience?)

## Appendix 4 – Pre and post session survey

### Self-Evaluation of Communication Skills

Please complete the self-assessment below based on your current skill level. Your responses will be kept completely confidential and will have no bearing whatsoever on your mark in this or other modules. By completing the survey you are giving your consent for us to store and analyse your responses and use them as data for our study, including the use of that data for publications (as explained in the information sheet).

#### 1. Please indicate whether you are an undergraduate or postgraduate student

Undergraduate

Postgraduate

#### 2. Please tick which age category applies to you

18

21-25

36-40

19

26-30

41-45

20

31-35

46+

#### 3. Please indicate which box most accurately describes your level of experience in communicating with service users in your past employment or voluntary work

Not at all experienced

Somewhat inexperienced

Somewhat experienced

Very experienced

#### 4. How ready do you feel to communicate with service users during your first placement?

Not at all ready

\_\_\_\_\_

Somewhat unready

Somewhat ready

Completely ready

**5. Please explain your answer to question 4 in the space below**

**6. How confident do you feel to use open and closed questions with service users during your first placement?**

Completely confident

\_\_\_\_\_

Somewhat confident

Somewhat unconfident

Not confident at all

**7. Please explain your answer to question 6 in the space below**

**8. How confident do you feel to use non-verbal communication methods (such as body language) with service users during your first placement?**

Completely confident

\_\_\_\_\_

Somewhat confident

Somewhat unconfident

Not confident at all

**9. Please explain your answer to question 8 in the space below**

**10. How confident do you feel to use active listening techniques with service users during your first placement?**

Not confident at all

\_\_\_\_\_

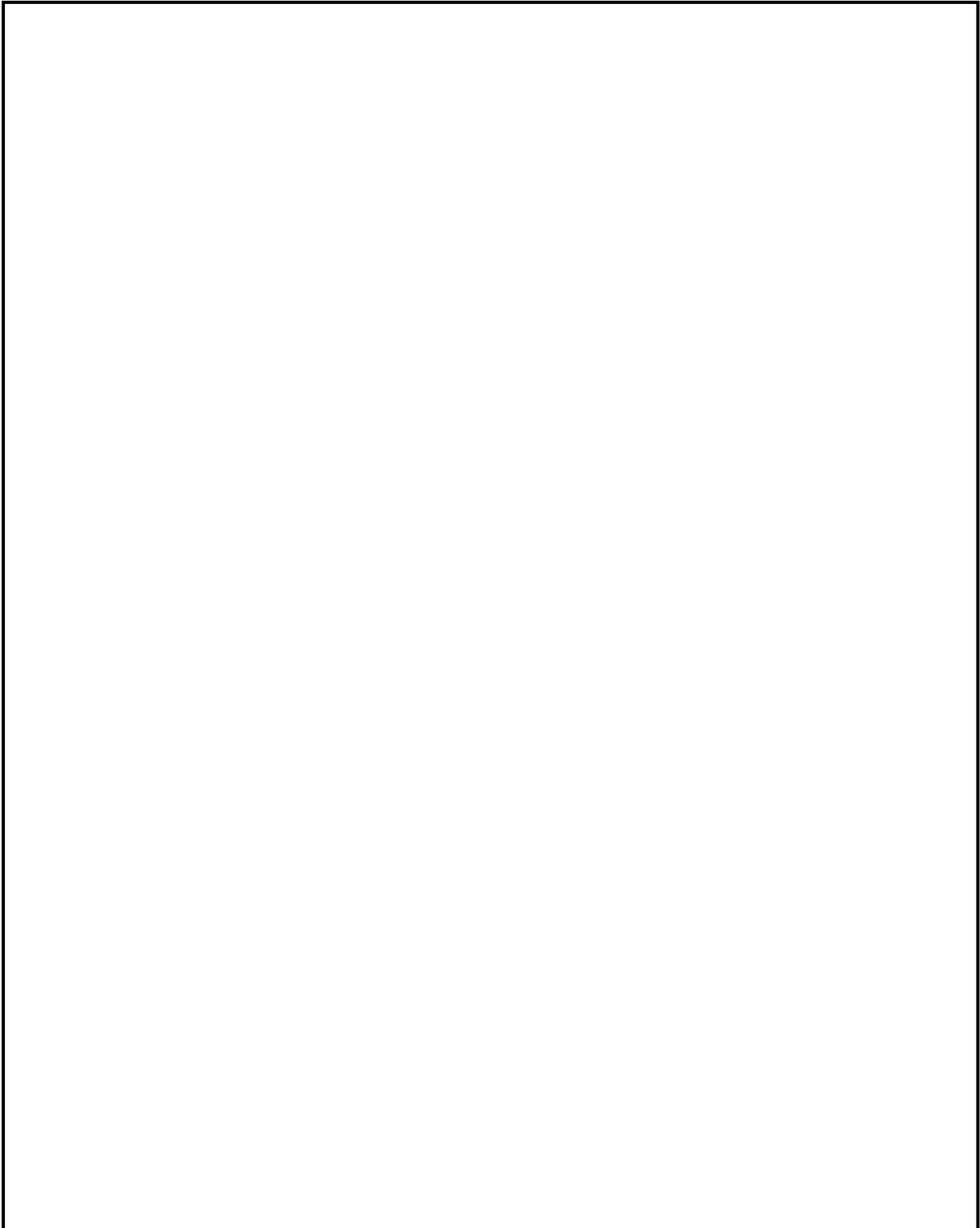
Somewhat unconfident

Somewhat confident

Completely confident

**11. Please explain your answer to question 10 in the space below**

**12. Please comment on what you think your strengths are in relation to communicating with others and what skills you would most like to improve?**

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for the respondent to write their answer to question 12.

**Thank you very much for participating in this research**

## Self-Evaluation of Communication Skills

Please complete the self-assessment below based on your current skill level. Your responses will be kept completely confidential and will have no bearing whatsoever on your mark in this or other modules. By completing the survey you are giving your consent for us to store and analyse your responses and use them as data for our study, including the use of that data for publications (as explained in the information sheet).

### 1. How ready do you feel to communicate with service users during your first placement?

Not at all ready

Somewhat unready

Somewhat ready

Completely ready

### 2. Please explain your answer to question 1 in the space below



**3. How confident do you feel to use open and closed questions with service users during your first placement?**

Completely confident

Somewhat confident

Somewhat unconfident

Not confident at all

**4. Please explain your answer to question 3 in the space below**

**5. How confident do you feel to use non-verbal communication methods (such as body language) with service users during your first placement?**

Completely confident

Somewhat confident

Somewhat unconfident

Not confident at all

**6. Please explain your answer to question 5 in the space below**

**7. How confident do you feel to use active listening techniques with service users during your first placement?**

Not confident at all

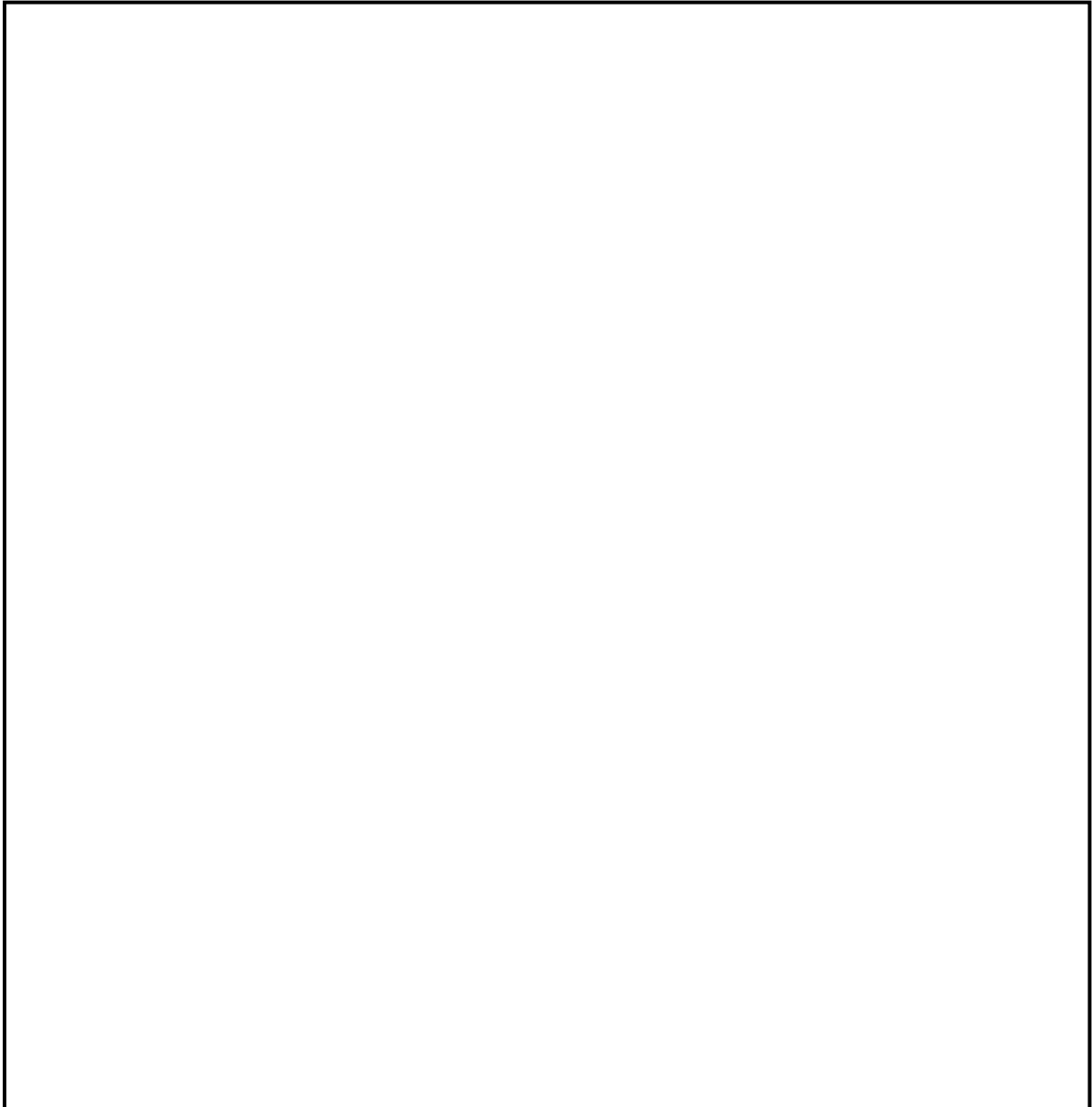
Somewhat unconfident

Somewhat confident

Completely confident

**8. Please explain your answer to question 7 in the space below**

**9. Please comment on what you think your strengths are in relation to communicating with others and what skills you would most like to improve?**

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for the respondent to write their answer to question 9. The box is currently blank.

**10. How helpful have you found this session in relation to developing your communication skills?**

**Very helpful**

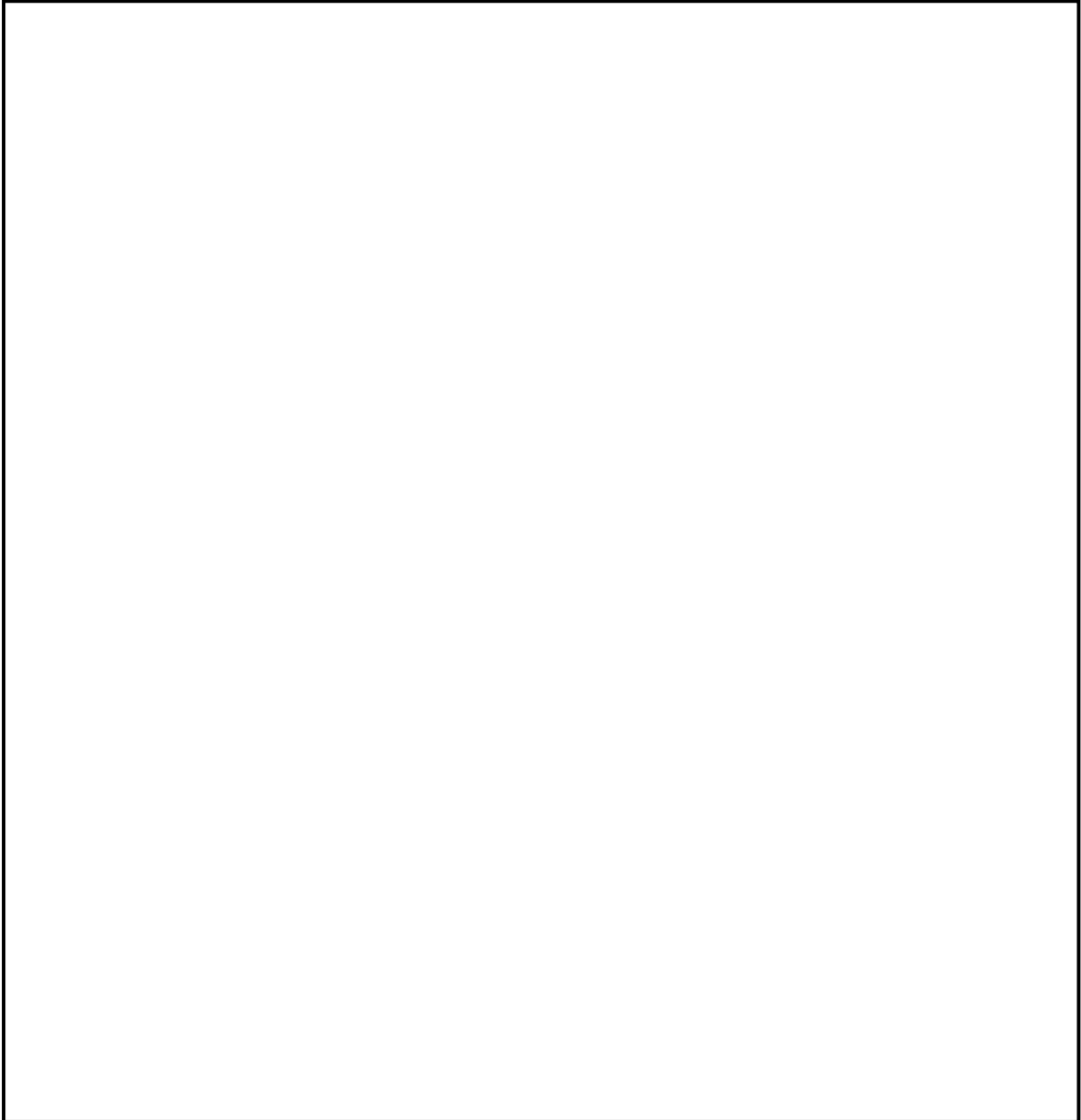
**Somewhat helpful**

**Somewhat unhelpful**

**Very unhelpful**

**11. Please explain your answer to question 10 in the space below**

**12. Please provide any comments you have about how this session could be developed or improved in the future**

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for participants to provide comments on how the session could be developed or improved in the future.

**Thank you very much for participating in this research.**