Transforming Our Teaching, Incorporating Service-learning into Macro Practice Social Work Classes.

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Introduction

At the University of Alaska Anchorage School of Social Work, faculty began a review and redesign of our curriculum in 2015 and developed new course content standards. New educational standards from the social work educational accreditation board were a driving force behind this curriculum redesign. Fundamental to the new standards is a need for students to demonstrate, at minimum, an entry-level competency of the required practice behaviors of a generalist social worker. One method for students to acquire professional competency is through service-learning opportunities that integrate knowledge development, skill acquisition, and community engagement. Thus, we took this opportunity to designate the macro practice courses[1] in both our undergraduate and graduate program as service-learning courses. This allowed us to re-envision and transform how we taught these courses with greater intention in developing student self-efficacy in macro practice.

Journey Toward Service-learning

As social work educators, we are committed to sharing our knowledge, values, ethics, and practical experience in the classroom. Our mission is to provide students with a strong body of knowledge and content that allows them to institute change and difference in their own lives and the lives of others. Our teaching philosophies are fundamentally guided by the works of Benjamin Bloom and Malcolm Knowles. Specifically, we develop course assignments utilizing Bloom's (1956) cognitive domain as a guide to support critical thinking

Abstract

This manuscript discusses how the use of service-learning in social work macro practice courses provided a foundation for the transformation of ourselves as instructors. By transforming macro practice courses with service-learning components, our central goal was to help students improve their self-efficacy in macro practice skills and, therefore, improve their self-efficacy as a generalist social worker. Our transformation as instructors involved two key aspects in our process, the first being co-teachers (across two sections of the same course) and the second being a reorientation of the course structure and plan. Incorporating service-learning projects prior to field placement provided our students an opportunity to apply what they learned in a course to a community setting. The transformational experience has implications for interdisciplinary opportunities utilizing a similar structure.

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[1] While the particular foci of a class may change, macro-level practice courses emphasize working with communities and organizations to advocate and institute social justice-oriented change.

among students. The cognitive domain involves cultivating knowledge as well the development of intellectual or critical thinking skills. Early course assignments are premised in promoting student's ability to recall acquired knowledge, whereas assignments towards the end of the course require students to internalize and evaluate content matter using advanced critical thinking techniques. The theoretical framework underpinning our teaching philosophies as it relates to the overall learning experience is from the work of Malcolm Knowles. Knowles's (1984) andragogy framework affords guidance specific to adult learners and can be employed in both face-to-face and online courses. Thus, we see our role as teachers to be one of facilitation and guidance as we collaborate with the students to develop learning and teaching opportunities in our courses. As instructors, we acknowledge the heterogeneity of a classroom and strive to develop courses in order to accommodate various abilities and styles of learning acquisition. We tend to use a combination of lectures, supplemental readings and materials, interactive activities, and peer education in each class. As social work educators, we express our belief that all students have the potential to grow and learn; in turn, students begin to develop the belief that all their clients (be they individuals, groups, or organizations) have the potential to grow, learn, and change. In our work with students, we let them know that we believe that each of them will start some place along a spectrum in their critical thinking skills and in their writing skills. Finally, we let them know that it is our job to help them progress along the continuum, and, in the end, their progression will benefit the interests of their professional career and future clients.

Both of us constantly strive to maximize the learning environment through classroom experience, assignments, and student-educator interactions, as well as create an environment where students feel safe to express their views and ask questions. We want our classrooms to be a place where students do not need to have all the answers but simply a willingness to challenge old ways of thinking and develop new skills to address the ever changing needs of their clients and the world around them. One specific objective we have as social work educators relates to our own abilities to change and develop as educators in our field. Thus, we continually strive to be open to hearing and partnering with students in an effort to grow and develop.

Connection to Our Profession
A familiar debate in the field of social work is that the primary foci for practitioners is often argued as one of the following: clinical social work practice at the micro level or community social work practice at the macro level (see for example, Haynes, 1998). By contrast, generalist social work practice is one where practitioners integrate theory, methods, values, and research at all levels of practice; in theory, silos do not exist for generalist practitioners. Similar to primary care physicians with a generalist knowledge of medicine, generalist social work practitioners are prepared to work at all levels of practice. Our students are expected, through their education, to acquire the ability to function effectively as generalist social work practitioners at the undergraduate level. However, upon

reflection of our discussions with students, we agreed that unlike micro practice courses, many (but not all) social work students come to their first macro practice class unfamiliar with its purpose or application, and lacking any relevant experience. The result of this lack of knowledge and experience are students who are oftentimes unsure, or even apathetic, about macro practice. This idea of students' preconceived indifference toward macro practice motivated us to redesign the course by adding a service-learning component that would fully engage them and stretch their emerging professional skills. One of our central goals was to help students improve their self-efficacy in macro practice skills and therefore improve their self-efficacy as a generalist social worker.

Planned Change Process
Generalist social work practice involves applying the Planned Change Process (PCP) for clients, which can be done at all system levels, (e.g., individuals, groups, organizations, and communities). Though different iterations of the process exist, at its base, the process recognizes several steps including: (1) the movement from preparation, to begin work through engagement with the client, (2) assessment of the client's strengths and needs, to development of an agreed upon plan of work, (3) from application and monitoring of interventions, to an evaluation of the work completed and termination of the professional work. For our students, use of the PCP allowed them to better understand how skills and knowledge they perceived as being for use with individuals and families were also applicable with larger systems. Thus, the PCP is just as it sounds, a process that can be applied at any level of practice for any number of problems and populations. While it is not a one-size fits all process, it is one that can be applied across a wide array of scenarios. For service-learning assignments that require the students to develop the projects, as ours did, this process guides students in how to approach their work with community agencies.

Transformation as Instructors
Our transformation as instructors involved two key aspects in our process, the first being co-teachers (across two sections of the same course), and the second being a reorientation of the course structure and plan. The integration of these key aspects allowed us to improve the overall experience for students and for ourselves as instructors.

Co-teachers
The first aspect of our instruction that was transformed was an explicit decision to view ourselves as co-teachers and partners, during the course. While we have each sought intermittent guidance in course design or implementation from other instructors in the past, the nature of this course fostered a desire to more closely work together to help ensure successful completion of the service-learning components. Our co-teaching approach was realized through collaborative redesign of the course syllabus, weekly sessions both prior to and after the different course sections met to ensure fidelity to the course outline, and a unified response for student questions and concerns that arose over the course of the

semester. Depending upon the topic and our own expertise with the subject matter, there were times when one of us would take the instructional lead in both sections of the course (e.g., Donna was the lead instructor for content, in-class activities, and team guidance about public deliberation and community forums; whereas Pam was the lead instructor for environmental justice theory, reflective processing, and related in-class activities). While we had different approaches to structuring our support for students around their various group dynamics, we took additional time together to consult and ensure we were addressing each situation in a cohesive and consistent manner across course sections.

This collaborative approach helped facilitate the success of the students' service-learning projects as students were able to utilize both faculty members as resources. We were able to more readily help the students form connections for their related projects between course sections, which led to increased marketing and participation opportunities for the team projects. Our co-teaching approach facilitated full transparency between us as we shared and learned from both what went well and what would need improvement for future semesters. Ultimately, the decision to co-teach strengthened our individual teaching skills, benefited our students, and reduced the time that we spent in course preparation as the work was split between us. This last benefit held true even when considering the bi-weekly check-ins between the faculty that took place.

Reorientation
The second aspect of our transformation as instructors was a reorientation about how a course should be held and what our role was within the course. We let go of self-imposed expectations that it was necessary for us to establish projects for students in order for them to be successful. This expectation comes, in part, from realizing how busy modern college students are with a wide array of responsibilities. Developing the projects ourselves would have fit our schedule and would likely have been easier, but it would not have utilized the expertise and knowledge of our students or been as responsive to their needs or perhaps the needs of the community. Providing only a base framework of what the undergraduate students should accomplish (i.e., a community, a fundraiser, and an advocacy movement), opened the projects up to the students. More importantly, a paradigm shift happened where we moved from the role of project supervisors, do what we tell you, to the role of project consultants, how can we help you. We still utilized our professional expertise, still provided guidance, but this shift allowed students to more fully own their projects and, we believe, led to better outcomes. In essence we were not only partners in our teaching but, more importantly, partners with our students.

While it was critical that the projects were beneficial to our partner agencies, part of the process of letting students take the lead was also about letting go of the idea of perfection. Service-learning projects within the community can involve a broad array of participants. Having each course develop and implement three distinct components increased the complexity of the projects. This called for

helping students understand, and reminding ourselves, that while service-learning projects experience delays and unforeseen complications, it is important to persevere and adapt. Acting as project consultants allowed us to help students move from the idea of a single right answer or approach.

Reorienting ourselves to a student driven service-learning class required us to have greater confidence in our students. We had to trust that they had or could develop the capabilities to develop and manage their projects. Because projects were team-based, part of this project management involved managing group dynamics and their individual contributions to the collective success. While it is not uncommon for students to bemoan group projects, our students reported that these teams were both successful and enjoyable. Perhaps because there was a tangible benefit to the community partners and the scope of each project was outside the ability of one person to implement, students recognized the value in group work.

Final Reflections

As universities recognize the value and move to incorporate high-impact practices for students, including community engagement and collaborative projects (Kuh, 2008), a thoughtful reexamination of how to incorporate service-learning projects can reenergize faculty and benefit students. The challenge of incorporating meaningful service-learning projects that included partnering with local social service agencies revitalized our teaching of these courses.

The use of service-learning projects within our macro practice courses helped us move from a review and discussion of community-based social justice issues to providing students the opportunity to develop a hands-on advocacy based approach to combating social injustice. Similarly, partnering with non-profit organizations allowed students the opportunity to develop a new context and understanding of working with social service agencies greater than could be found solely in the classroom. Students' application of the PCP framework throughout the semester on their projects helped them gain a new perspective on how the knowledge they had acquired in previous courses could be utilized in a macro practice setting.

Students were able to apply the PCP in a way that had meaningful outcomes and had connections to their personal lives and communities. We found in our evaluative discussions with students that their self-efficacy of macro practice skills improved, and many agreed that macro practice was a bigger part of generalist social work practice than was previously thought or considered. While this is validating for us as instructors seeking to improve our student outcomes, more importantly it validated for us that the transformative approach worked.

All accredited social work education requires the inclusion of field education, the profession's "signature pedagogy" (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). The field education component of the social work degree is integral to students learning how to be ethical and competent practitioners. Incorporating service-learning projects prior to field placement provided our students an opportunity to

apply what they learn in a course to a community setting. We believe that service-learning can act as a precursor to the types of projects students may experience in their field setting in any discipline, stimulating their critical thinking skills and, with our projects, allowing for a type of autonomy that can give students confidence as they move into their field placements. In addition, for students with limited experience in social services or with community partners, the service-learning project helped them gain experience with professional communication and behaviors that may also provide confidence as students enter field education.

The same type of benefits that social work students gain from service-learning also are of benefit to students across the array of disciplines. While this type of multi-course structure will take greater coordination, the success that we experienced has helped transform our approach to instruction and opened up possibilities for how we imagine our future courses. Ultimately, we envision creating an interprofessional learning environment for our students that helps to form connections not just between our students and the community but also between students across disciplines.

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