Social Work Practice Courses: A Teaching Note

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Abstract

This paper reviews current teaching methods in Social Work Practice courses. It offers an innovative approach to improve Social Work Practice courses in higher education. It centers on the use of evidence-informed approaches by teachers and students as a way of learning and improving social workers entering the field.

Keywords: Social work practice; Social work practice courses; Higher education; MSW; Theory; Evidence-based practice (EBP); Evidence-informed.

Introduction

Developing social work practice skills is a key component of learning to be a professional social worker. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) describes social work practice as the professional application of social work values, principles and techniques; assisting people with getting services they need, counseling individuals, families, and groups, improving social and health services in communities, and being involved in legislative processes. Social work practice courses combine other MSW courses, such as human development, social policy, and research methods, and require students to put their knowledge into practice. The underpinning of this pedagogy is different from that of other courses because of the performance expectations required to demonstrate learning outcomes [1].

Social work practice courses are taught and guided by theory. Prominent theories used to teach social work practice courses are experiential learning, evidence-based practices, reflexive practice, critical post-modern approaches, competence-based, discussion-based methodology, task-centered, and eclectic approaches. Additionally, there are several approaches to teaching social work practice that are effective. Included are some approaches from the literature review: flipped classrooms, role playing, evidence-based practice, experiential learning, the case method approach, and Alter and Egan [2], logic modeling (critical thinking steps/process). Logic modeling challenges students to think about the clinical experience as a whole, further supporting the idea that MSW classes are connected. Furthermore, some possible learning outcomes for social work practice courses are:

1. Students are able to critically examine, select, and apply theoretical models in direct social work practice

2. Students are able to consolidate their knowledge from MSW courses and put knowledge into practice

3. Students have developed counseling skills for individuals, families, and groups

4. Students have developed critical thinking and problem-solving skills

Teaching social work practice courses is not an easy task. In a study conducted by Knight [3], the skills needed to teach social work practice in a generalist MSW course were explored. For this critique of the literature, the main focus is on the lack of appropriate use of a classroom and teaching skills to the students that are vital to social work practice. Particularly, instructors in this study rarely discussed their own mistakes in the field, were more likely to avoid taboo subjects, and did not help with bridging the gap between the classroom and field [3]. Furthermore, students emphasized the importance of instructors understanding what students are doing in the field, rather than understanding the class material itself.

An innovative approach to social work practice foundation courses researched by Holmes, et al. [4]. Explored the use of interactive technology and technology driven teaching methods to promote active learning. This approach to active learning seems to be a natural fit to teaching social work practice skills where students were required to recognize their own diverse learning styles and enhance their application of practice skills in the classroom and field [4]. Flipped classrooms were used in this study and students were asked to view online lectures and other material prior to class and use the classroom time for collaboration and hands-on demonstration of skills. The use of classroom time was focused on deepening understanding rather than lecture. Other technology applications (Google Application Suite, Google +, Google Hangouts) were used to create an online learning community, increase collaborative learning among students, and bridge the gap between classroom and field [4].

Overall, this innovative approach to active learning and flipped classroom implementation was evaluated by instructors and students. The approach implemented by [4]. Was rated successful among students and instructors, with feedback on ways to continue to enhance the use of flipped classrooms, technology driven teaching methods, and collaborative learning in social work practice courses. Lastly, some feedback to consider in order to improve practice courses using this approach is to limit the number of new technologies as some students indicated they were overwhelmed and techniques to flipped classrooms require a great deal of time by the instructor to prepare the material for outside of the classroom [4].

The case method approach is another approach to teaching social work practice that is innovative and has been proven effective by many studies [5]. The case method of teaching uses a discussion-based methodology and relies on real-life examples. It is an 'active pedagogical process' to help students actively develop essential

critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Instructors select or develop cases and facilitate classroom discussions based on questions they designed or teaching points they identified [5].

Teaching philosophies and practices in social work education influence the next generation of social work professionals [6]. In this qualitative case study by Duron and Giardina [6], approaches to teaching social work content and considerations of the CSWE Educational Policy Accreditation Standards core competencies throughout the teaching process is explored. Of the four themes identified and considered essential by instructors when teaching social work, (4) core competencies not being evident at a conscious level, is of concern. Instructors were clear on their teaching philosophies, how to bridge the gap between field and classroom, and enhancing students' critical thinking, but were not clear on core competencies and their connection to teaching [6]. It is essential for instructors to understand the connection between core competencies and teaching social work practice. Reflexivity by students is expected, as it should be by instructors.

An interesting study was done by Goldingay [1] on teaching social work practice skills inclusively to diverse students in Australia. Social work students were asked to reflect on their cultural location and identify the impact of 'white' culture on competent practice in field settings. In contrast, the interesting aspect of this study is not based on student's use of reflexivity, but rather the instructor's use of reflexivity. In this study the instructor uses critical reflection as an effort to improve his skills in teaching professional practice skills [1]. As stated above, reflexivity by students is expected, as it should be by instructors.

Cultivating reflexivity on an individual level can help students understand themselves better and feel prepared for a social work career [7]. Chow et al. [7]. Share their aims and outcomes of their course 'Knowing Ourselves, Knowing Our World', an elective course promoting reflexivity for first-year social work students. Importantly, results from this study showed an increase in self-reflection among students and changes in their perceived need for self-reflection. Reflection is an integral part of learning. Neurobiology supports reflection being a vital piece of enhancing learning [8]. Therefore, reflexive-practice among students in social work practice courses should be integral in the curriculum.

Undoubtedly, there is a connection between social work courses (Figure 1). Social work practice courses require students to demonstrate skills and knowledge from all of their courses. Specifically, I will be exploring the connection between research and social work practice courses. According to Lukton [9], research needs to be implemented on the MSW level and part of practice on the MSW level. Research is an important skill for social workers to master [10]. Importantly, instructors who teach research to clinical practice students face the task of helping them learn how to apply empirical methodologies to their clinical practice in real-world settings [11].

Evidence-based practice is prevalent in literature on social work practice courses and social work curriculum. What is Evidence-Based Practice (EBP)? How is EBP defined in social work programs? These are common questions in the literature. EBP in social work is defined as "the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current
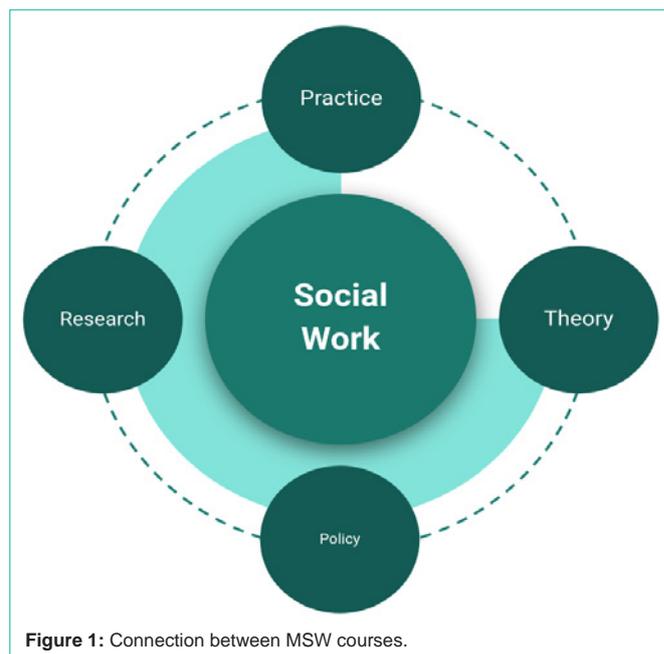

Figure 1: Connection between MSW courses.

best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients" [12]. EBP is prevalent in social work literature, though is based more on the medical model. According to Traube, et al. [12]. Core EBP is found in research methods courses though if EBP is not integrated into practice courses it is difficult for students to put research into practice. Consequently, questioning the sequence of MSW courses given that research methods is often taught in the second year of programs. Rather than using EBP steps/skills, many social workers rely on advice from coworkers, supervisors, or other sources. Furthermore, real-world limitations come into play when considering implementation of EBP steps taught in the classroom and applied in clinical settings [13]. Smith, et al. [14]. Operationally outlines EBP into four steps, including identification of the problem and turning it into a research question, finding the best relevant and related evidence of the problem, appraising the evidence critically, and applying the best intervention as determined from the evidence, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention chosen. Howard, et al. [13] describe the steps of EBP skills as the following:

"To adequately prepare our MSW graduate students for evidence-based practice, we agreed that they should be able to (a) understand and value the evidence-based perspective; (b) select empirically tested interventions or practice methods supported by the best available scientific evidence; (c) appreciate the degree to which leading social work theories and policies are research based; (d) effectively deliver micro-, mezzo-, and macro- practice interventions with the strongest empirical support in their fields of practice; (e) adapt the recommendations of practice guidelines, treatment manuals, and systematic reviews for the use with specific client populations and in diverse agency settings; (f) evaluate the effectiveness of their own practice efforts; and (g) identify their information needs as they arise in varied practice settings, define searchable questions with which to query relevant scientific databases, and locate, critically appraise, and apply interventions based on the evidence they judge valid and pertinent."

Social work takes place in a context of economic, social, juridical, cultural, and moral constraints [15]. Muller [15] continues on to describe basic self-reflective skills needed as a social work professional, ability to question already given answers, and be secure when questioning the status quo. In essence, calling upon equity, diversity, and inclusion in social work practice. The literature thus far has defined social work practice, described theories used when teaching social work practice courses, and identified what is and isn't working in social work practice courses. There were gaps in the literature regarding diversity in social work practice courses. Specifically, case methods/case scenarios/case vignettes including diverse populations, marginalized populations, and/or oppressed populations, and practice in various settings.

A suggested innovative approach to improve social work practice courses encompasses many of what has been discussed in the literature. First, the course should be taught using experiential learning, reflexive-practice, and evidence-based theory. However, the use of 'evidence-based practice' terminology perpetuates the lack of inclusion in social work courses and 'evidence-informed' terminology should be used instead. It would be important to have an open discussion in class regarding different terms, such as 'evidence-based' to encourage exploration and reflection upon the impact and personal meaning of various terminology used in the social work field. Evidence-informed steps teps identified by [13]. Will be integral in the course. Therefore, basic research concepts required to implement evidence-informed steps will be taught in this course.

Furthermore, students will practice the steps in every class using various case scenarios/vignettes requiring them to implement evidence-informed skills in a timely manner. Case scenarios/vignettes used in class will include diverse populations and scenarios, increasing student's ability to apply their skills in a variety of settings and with a diverse audience. Evidence-informed approaches will be an expectation of field instructors and they will be asked to reinforce these practices in the field. Ideally, universities will adopt the practice of allowing students who graduate authorization access to the library, as this is an essential requirement to apply evidence-informed steps in practice. Finally, another integral part of this suggested approach to improve social work practice courses is reflexivity.

This innovative approach to improve social work practice courses should be evaluated using a variety of methods, such as observations throughout the course by the instructor, pre-test, mid-test, and post-tests of implementation of evidence-informed skills, critical thinking, and application of empirical evidence in various situations. Furthermore, course evaluations, satisfaction surveys of the course, and field instructor evaluations will include evaluation of this new approach. Finally, and perhaps the most important method for evaluating this approach will be through reflexivity from students and instructors. Students and instructors will be required to reflect upon the course throughout, including reflection upon teaching theories, case scenarios, diversity, use of self, and confidence level with evidence-informed step skills.

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