

An Innovative Social Work Pedagogical Partnership

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ABSTRACT

In this narrative reflective article the researchers aim is to report on an innovative social work teaching and learning experience. The partnership consisted of social work faculty and graduate and undergraduate students from two historically black universities and a predominantly white university, all located in the state of Mississippi. This article presents adult learning theory, the rationale for professional development, the planning process, the social work educational themes, and the lessons learned from this experience.

Keywords: Social work professional development, innovative teaching, adult learning

1. Introduction

This article describes an innovative example of the collaborative efforts of social work faculty and students from two Historically Black Universities or Colleges: Mississippi Valley State University (MVSU), Jackson State University (JSU), and a majority white university--the University of Mississippi (UM). The partnership proceeded to plan, create, develop, and deliver a unique learning experience to social work students. The article more fully describes the student and faculty learning opportunity phenomenon known as the 2014 MVSU Social Work Education Pre-Conference Institute, hereafter called the Pre Conference Institute. This article presents:

- A. The underlying and foundational pedagogical theory and principles related to teaching and learning.
- B. The rationale for professional development and training for social workers.
- C. The participatory planning process.
- D. The social work educational themes and,
- E. The lessons learned from reflecting on this experience.

2. An Innovative Teaching Approach: Pedagogical Theory and Principles

The underlying and foundational pedagogical theory and principles related to teaching and learning in the context of professional development requires the teacher to have a firm grasp of how adults learn. The best known theory of adult learning is Knowles andragogy. Andragogy is the study of adult learning. There is a lack of empirical support for andragogy, however it is still associated with adult learning. Malcolm Knowles is an American practitioner and theorist of adult education. In the 1970s, he pioneered the theory of adult learning. Malcolm defined andragogy as "the art and science helping adults learn". He identified six principles of adult learning: adults are practical, goal oriented, relevancy oriented, like to be respected, internally self-directed and motivated, and brings things they have experienced in life and their knowledge to learning experiences. Knowles focused on three hypothesis regarding andragogy and adult characteristics. Hypothesis 1: There is a difference between adult and childhood learning. Hypothesis 2: Depth and volume of experience accounts for the primary difference between adult and childhood learning. Hypothesis 3: Adults require instructional strategies different from those of children due to differences in learner characteristics (Adult Learning Theory and Principles, 2010).

Knowles' adult learning theory, hypothesis, and assumptions have been tested by others. Carpenter-Aeby(2013) conducted a study that used an instructional method for assessment at the graduate level for a psychopathology course in Social Work in order to enhance the learner's ability to acquire and retain knowledge. The study sampled 24 first year, part-time female student from a large state university in Southeast. Their ages ranged from 27-63 years old. All were employed either full or part time. The Kiersey Temperament Sorter was used to assess their learning style. The paper-pencil test was followed by an in class discussion. Once the instructional tool was identified by learning style, they then discussed how to incorporate the tool to maximize learning experiences best suited for them. Results showed that andragogy can help adult learners acquire new knowledge in a way that makes sense to the learner and their unique learning strategy (Aeby & Aeby, 2013). While this was a relatively small study with limitations regarding the ability to generalize about adult learning theory, it does illuminate the positive possibilities of utilizing adult learning theory when teaching adults. Research by Cartney (2000) explored furthering the process of continuing professional development in social work by using adult learning theory. The study sample included social work practice teachers to test whether adult learning theory practices such as acknowledging diversity of learning styles and students experience would benefit or enhance the learning of students. Findings supports that understanding student learning styles aid instructors to more effectively teach students and continuing their professional development (Cartney, 2000).

3. Rationale for Professional Development and Training for Social Workers

Why is it important in Social Work education for Social Work students to learn to facilitate professional development workshops? Several very important reasons exist for social workers to engage in ongoing training, education, and [professional development. The national Association of social workers reminds professional social workers that it is essential and required for Social Workers (NASW) to engage in professional development workshops to ensure quality services to clients. Professional development is a

self directed process that requires social workers to assume responsibility for their profession and acquired knowledge.

Furthermore, it is ethically required of social workers to make sure that their knowledge of research, theory, and techniques that guide social work practice is current to be able to provide excellence in the practice of social work. NASW provides professional development programs for its members such as education and training courses, publications, and credentials. In order to stay current in the field of social work, one must be able to apply the latest research, understand new regulations and its implications, acquire the training to be able to meet the needs of an aging population, and maintain licenses and credentials (NASW, 2014). Social Workers must understand that attending professional workshops will enable them to grow and manage their careers more effectively, help them to better serve individuals, families, and communities, and maintain a practice of excellence. Professional development and continuing education can include professional networking, advocacy, licensure, credentials, and certifications preparation and maintenance.

4. The Participatory Planning Process

Understanding that the partnership was established for creating and facilitating an innovative teaching and learning opportunity, faculty partners from the three universities carefully and intentionally used participatory principles during the planning and implementation phases of the project. Student and faculty participation democratized the planning and gave historically left off student voices an opportunity to be heard and subsequently created opportunities for students to play an integral role in the conceptualization, planning, implementation, and evaluation of the initiative (Ravenell, Johnson, & Whitaker, 2006; Aston, Meagher-Stewart, Edwards, & Young, 2009; World Health Organization, 2003; Besong & Olugbemiga, 2012). Buy-in and ownership in the project was important for sustaining the energy to complete the project. Both faculty and student participants were empowered by collaborative communication and consistent encouragement from faculty to exercise self-determination in topic selection, creativity in presentation formatting, and facilitation styles.

5. Social Work Educational Themes

Using the social work core values detailed by the (2004) Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) of service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, competence, human rights, and scientific inquiry, students under the direction of faculty selected the following topical themes: 1. An Introduction to Eugenics (MVSU); 2. Child Sexual Abuse Education; Giving Voice to the Silent Epidemic (JSU); and 3. Micro-aggressions in Everyday Life (Ole Miss). Each group presentation included several core competencies and practice behaviors found in the CSWE Educational Policies and Practice Standards. Accordingly, the student presentations created teachable moments and practice experiences for students to:

- A. Identify and conduct themselves in the role professional social workers.
- B. Recognize their personal values in comparison with professional values.
- C. Utilize critical thinking and creativity while communicating relevant information regarding human rights and social justice issues.
- D. Integrate knowledge from research as well as, practice wisdom recognizing the interconnections of oppression and strategies to promote human and civil rights.
- E. Demonstrate effective oral and written communication while developing and facilitating professional presentations related to basic human rights, freedom, and equality.

- F. Demonstrate leadership in promoting service delivery improvements and professional self-improvement through professional growth and development.
- G. Practice reflection to promote their continuous professional development.
- H. Practice and exhibit professional deportment in appearance and group facilitation.
- I. Encourage the incorporation of cultural competency, inclusion, and diversity while advocating for human rights and social and economic justice into practice.
- J. Discuss the intersectionality of age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation.
- K. Increase their knowledge of the various forms of discrimination and appreciation that, as a consequence of social difference, a person's life experiences may include oppression, as well as privilege and power.

6. Lessons Learned from the Reflective Process

In an 1871 letter from George Washington to John Armstrong, President Washington explained that it useful to reflect and look back in order to learn from errors and to benefit from past experiences (Proverbia, 2014). Similarly, Morrison (1993) stated emphatically, "It is not sufficient to have an experience to learn. Without reflecting on the experience it may be lost or misunderstood" (p. 45). From the beginning, faculty understood that reflective thinking provides an opportunity to put the past learning into perspective. Faculty and students met separately to participate in debriefing sessions in the week immediately following Pre Conference Institute. Faculty employed the reflective process to help students and faculty understand the value of their Pre Conference learning experiences. In order to frame and better understand the debriefing we utilized the Reflective Learning Model as a guide. The model rests on two premises and asserts that the main purpose of the activity was to facilitate learning and development. Congruent with the theoretical underpinning of this article, the Reflective Learning Model rests upon the principles of adult experiential learning. Moreover, the second premise mirrors Butler's (1996) assertion that learning becomes transformational by means of reflection (Kolb, 1984; Scho'n, 1987). The following lessons were gleaned from the reflective debriefing session:

- A. Learning-by-doing is valuable approach to acquiring social work knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- B. Students gain confidence and voiced a sense of feeling empowered from their role as planners and presenters.
- C. Students and faculty expressed that it was beneficial to view and treat students as professionals.
- D. Students and faculty agreed that non-traditional and innovative approaches to teaching and learning are exciting and rewarding.
- E. Students have interests, skills, and abilities that can be leveraged to develop as professional social workers that are rarely used during traditional professional development offerings.
- F. Students and teachers learned that learning can be exciting, fun, challenging, and rewarding.
- G. Students learned that there is synergistic value in working in racially diverse groups.
- H. Faculty learned that there is value in teaching and learning partnerships across institutions and levels of study.

7. Conclusion

In the end, the researchers are excited that social work students can and do learn as a direct result of innovative teaching approaches. However, as we observe the process of educating professional social workers, the classroom and field placement model dominates the pedagogical landscape with a few and far in-between sprinkling of service learning offerings. Finally, the partnership turned out to be a lesson in

teaching and a lesson in learning. Both groups of teachers and students learned from the experience. The authors recommend that further research with rigorous evaluation is needed to clarify and validate the significance and effectiveness of adult learning and experiential approaches to teaching social work.

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