

BSW Students Personal Reflection and Self-Correction: Teaching Implications

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Abstract

This article focuses on the evaluation of three hundred and fifty undergraduate students attending a rural university in East Texas. The results from the study helped to develop teaching strategies to enhance Baccalaureate Social Work (BSW) students in understanding personal reflection and self-correction. The data was collected over a period of eight years. In this study social work educators were interested in helping students become aware of the personal values that must be addressed once they enter the program. Identifying self-reflective approaches allows students to explore personal strengths and challenges. As a result of this self-reflection, students can begin their journey toward professional growth, overcome limitations, and develop professional competencies.

Keywords: BSW, social work education, self-reflection, teaching strategies, program evaluation, CSWE, EPAS

In order to effectively prepare students for social work practice, it is important to become aware of and engage in personal self-reflection and correction toward the development of professionalism. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Accreditation Policy Statement (EPAS) 2.1.1 “Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly” states the importance of helping students to learn about advocacy, personal reflection/self-correction, attend to professional boundaries, professional demeanor, life-long learning and the use of supervision is part of professional behavior, (CSWE, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to report on the use of a teaching strategy or exercise which enables educators to enhance student self-reflection, identify specific needs (in terms of professionalism). Student responses are presented and recommendations for applying Educational Standard 2.1.1 in the classroom are provided to help students begin their journey as life-long learners. In addition, achieving this first competency provides a foundation for signature pedagogy.

According to Homonoff (2008), field education as “Signature pedagogy represents the central form on instruction and learning in which a profession socializes its students to perform the role of practitioner”. The authors suggest ways for educators and field instructors to prepare BSW social work students learn professional reflection and correction behavior.

Signature Pedagogy and Explicit Curriculum

Accordingly, signature pedagogy should (1) teach a wide variety of skills of assessment and intervention (2) balance the teaching of skills with encouragement of reflection (3) teach interns to connect theory and practice, (4) develop an integrative model of supervision (5) apply research to practice (6) show appropriate support to interns and uphold the mission of field education Homonoff (2008).

Now that the explicit curriculum (which includes all BSW courses) and signature pedagogy (which is the field component where students demonstrate acquired skills) share equal importance in developing professional behavior, the focus begins with helping students in the classroom develop personal awareness and self-reflection. Teaching students' self-awareness via educational strategies and exercises is an attempt to help them understand how their life experiences, values and beliefs influence how they perceive the world and others around them. Students will learn to transition from personal values to the professional values of the social work profession while maintaining their own identity and sense of self. There are a number of self-awareness activities including self-assessment templates (Barker & Floersch, 2010), case presentations and role plays, (Urdang, 2010), creative expression, (Johnston, 2009) and personal narratives (Honigsfeld & Allen, 2010) that help students improve self-reflection.

According to Reupert (2009), students need explicit opportunities to develop "awareness on their unique strengths which they bring to the helping relationship and to explore the motives which lead them to want to care for others". Conversely, Yip (2006), cautions that encouraging students to self-reflect may at times have unintended consequences and present challenges for ongoing professional development. Students, particularly entry-level generalist social workers may tend to be tentative about beginning the practice of "Identifying as a professional social worker and conducting oneself accordingly". This may lead at times to over analyzing situations or the blurring of professional boundaries.

Becoming skilled social work professionals who are critical thinkers with consistent judgment is a process. Still, the development and identification of additional strategies to access student learning outcomes are necessary if students are going to improve professional self-awareness. Social work educators must also continue to improve classroom pedagogy and expand beyond lecture format only, to actively engaging students in an interactional learning environment (Urdang, 2010).

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was utilized to conduct this study. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), qualitative methodology enables researchers to collect in-depth data which is explorative in nature. For the purpose of this study, the qualitative approach seemed appropriate. It is also envisioned that this qualitative approach will result in item identification for the development of a survey. Such a survey can be used for program assessment purposes, specifically focusing on the CSWE competencies which are augmented by practice behaviors. In order to conduct a systematic method of data collection and analysis, the authors were guided by specific questions:

- How can social work educators' best prepare students to become professional social workers who conduct oneself accordingly?
- What instruments can be used as part of the learning process towards becoming professional social workers?
- What can we learn from the challenges and strengths identified by students over several semesters?
- What career plans do students have?
- Implications to social work practice; how can this project inform the BSW curriculum?
- How can self-reflection be used to enhance the learning process?

Data collected as part of an undergraduate course(s) showed evidence of student's strengths, challenges, and career goals. This data plays a valuable role in streamlining courses in the curriculum and addressing the needs of students. Typically in a study the research questions inform the aim and the objectives of a study and also guide the selection of research methodologies.

In this case, the data was collected as part of classroom teaching and the qualitative nature informed the analysis process. In terms of IRB procedures, the research was exempt based on the following criteria: "46.101 (b) (1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods".

Data Collection

Educators utilized this teaching strategy/exercise with students at the beginning of each fall and spring semester in the Introduction to Social Work and/or Human Behavior classes. The students were instructed to participate in an exercise which would be confidential and only the individual and instructor would be privy to the comments. First, the students were given 5x7 index cards and asked to write down three strengths that they already have or possess that will be valuable to them as they begin their journey toward becoming a professional social worker. For example, these strengths can include being a good listener, being compassionate or whatever strengths they already perceive to have. Second, the students list three challenges that they believe to be obstacles to developing professional boundaries and relationships. These challenges can include being judgmental, having a hard time saying no, or just being a people pleaser. Lastly, students were asked to list three possible populations or consumer groups they might want to work with when they become professional social workers.

This data is then aggregated by the instructor and presented to the class with all identifiers removed. A student is asked to read aloud for the class all the statements made in the category on personal strengths and they try to identify themes and commonalities. The same process is done for the category of personal challenges. The instructor helps students by utilizing universality to help them understand that everyone has strengths and challenges in becoming a professional helper. This journey includes increasing one's awareness, challenging beliefs and transitioning from personal to professional values of social work. Students have the option to share or self-disclose strengths or challenges in class or to use this information privately for self-reflection or self-correction.

Hopefully this new awareness will help students identify or red flag any behavior that may hinder or do harm on their career-long journey of being a professional social worker. The third category attempts to identify what population students feel comfortable or capable of working with. This approach helps students explore and begin thinking about issues and situations of working with diverse groups that will help them improve self-awareness as they progress through the BSW social work program. Also, students start to think about their own maturity with strengths and challenges and where that knowledge, values and skills might best apply in their professional careers.

Data Analysis

Computerized data analysis strategies (NVivo 8) as well as manual coding were used to analyze the data. Both these strategies were used in order to enhance trustworthiness of the data analysis process. The process included open coding, axial coding and comparative coding. (Denzin & Lincoln: 2008 and Neuman: 2006). The comprehensive coding process enabled the authors to identify specific trends and patterns based on specific responses repeated by the students, confirming the initial questions by the authors.

The data analysis process was structured in the following steps which were used in this analysis: organizing and mining of data, developing categories for coding, coding and analysis of data and running NVivo queries on the data.

The process of organizing and mining data is a tedious and laborious process (Rubin & Babbie, 2011, Falkner, 2009 and Neuman, 2006). For the purpose of this study each card was entered and the data analyzed. Data was identified by means of (1) time and (2) semester in order to keep the data in a structured manner. All of the data refinement was based on the narrative provided by students. Three major categories of data were identified namely (1) Challenges (2) Strengths and (3) Career goals. In addition, the NVivo 8 coding resulted in a fourth category namely characteristics. This was based on the initial task presented to students. After open coding and refining the data more categories emerged, which included (1) emotions (2) behavior (3) actions (4) values (5) competencies (6) attitudes and (7) knowledge. Both comparative and axial coding was used to seek specific explanations for data (De Vos, 2008; Rubin & Babbie, 2011, Falkner, 2009).

The coding process enhanced the development of a comprehensive understanding of the data. Themes and patterns emerged from the refined data. These themes are used to initiate discussions and to inform the research process. The project model with categories is presented in Table 1.

Trustworthiness of Data

In order to ensure trustworthiness, the authors identified the following critical elements throughout the data collection and analysis process. In qualitative analysis the criteria for trustworthiness of data included neutrality, credibility and consistency. (Rubin & Babbie (2011), Neuman & Dreuger (2003), Shenton (2004), Huberman & Miles (2002). Neutrality refers to the researcher's ability to implement the research in an unbiased and objective manner. Due to the very nature of research procedures, qualitative research tends to be less objective than quantitative methodology. In terms of credibility, the question can be asked – how credible is this data? In qualitative research credibility is concerned with the world of the participants. The questions to be asked were – Are the research participants able to reflect views that are real? Can these views be recognized as credible? This is an important part of ensuring trustworthiness of the study. The credibility of the data is specifically enhanced by the fact that it was collected over a period of time (16 semesters). Consistency was ensured by repeating the method of data collection in the same manner. There was consistency in the student population, the course(s) where it was administered, and the lecturer who administered the exercise, and the questions asked.

Results of the Study

The following themes emerged from the data analysis:

Strengths

- a. Student responses reflected strengths as it relates to emotions, behavior, values, ethics, specific actions, competencies, characteristics and knowledge.
- b. Students reported on specific issues in social work which they fear, but they do not necessarily view these as challenges.
- c. Students are driven /motivated by emotions (they consider these as strengths) toward becoming social workers. These emotions include loving people, loving specific populations at risk, such as the elderly and children and being empathetic.
- d. It is evident that students' drive to help other people is a strong motivational aspect in entering the profession. Students report that they feel they can help people with problems and in fact their own experiences motivate them to help other people.
- e. Specific experiences such as being a single-parent, financial difficulties and working within specific settings are considered as strengths.
- f. Student responses focused on the importance of certain values and ethics impacting on life and the profession. These include being truthful, being non-judgmental and having faith.
- g. Students voiced their beliefs about populations-at-risk and life in general. For example "*I believe that everyone deserves the right to grow up in a good healthy environment*".
- h. Students identified communication skills/competencies as the most common strength. From the data it is evident that students were of the opinion that they had listening skills. Other communication skills were limited. (such as problem solving)
- i. Students are of the opinion that they are able to organize and structure and set specific goals; Students are comfortable working in a diverse setting. This is evident from responses such a "*I work well with people in many situations including stressful*" "*Tolerant of differences*" "*I can put myself in others shoes*"
- j. Self-awareness was evident and students were able to identify knowledge/understanding and a need to further develop. For example: knowledge about the client system, understanding behavior, ability to analyze information and understanding populations-at-risk.
- k. Students were determined responsible, goal orientated, and motivated.

In summary it appears that the data reflects students' integration of life experiences.

Characteristics

Although the data reflected a range of characteristics, there were specific repetitive characteristics:

- a. Listening skills
- b. Non-judgmental view and actions towards other people
- c. Problem-solving competencies
- d. Compassion with other people
- e. Respect for diversity

Challenges

It is evident from the category on challenges that students do not perceive the following characteristics as limitations, but rather as obstacles that could worked on. The responses strongly correspond with EPAS standard (2.1.1) which relates to professional behavior.

- a. Students identify feelings of inadequateness as an important challenge. These include fear of handling difficult situations, not being able to say “no” in specific situations, inability to handle dual relationships, and feelings of not being able to set boundaries.
- b. Students are aware of the fact that they need to develop specific competencies in order to become professional social workers.
- c. Students identified specific personal characteristics which they believe limits their professional behavior.
- d. A strong knowledge base is identified as important to understand professional social work.
- e. Students are realistic about the type of situations in social work practice which are out of their control. These include family dysfunction, individual resistance, problems within the environment, and specific situations they cannot change.
- f. Issues related to values and norms are formulated as fears. Students see cultural and human diversity, judgmental behavior and belief systems as issues related to values and norms that they need to learn more about.
- g. Transference and counter transference, specifically as it relates to their own life experiences.
- h. Effectively dealing with own issues and the transference of those issues on the client systems.
- i. Emotional distancing and the setting of functional boundaries
- j. Students feel that they are not able to say “no”. It seems that their willingness to help others and their motivation to change situations impacts their ability to say no.
- k. Resistance towards stepping out of their own comfort zone.
- l. Self-reflection in terms of own hopes, ideals and abilities to bring about change.

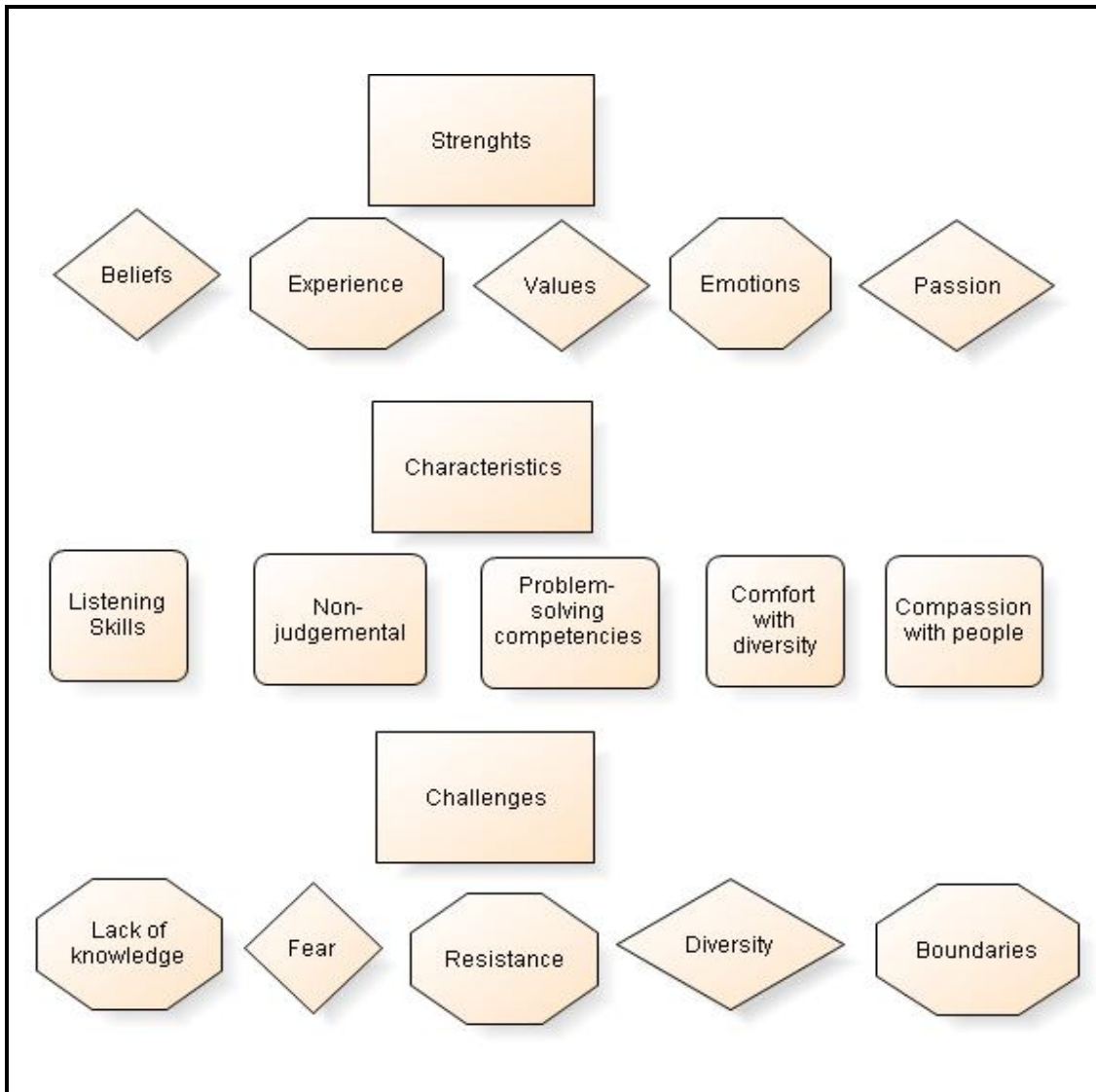
In summary, the fears are all related to specific practice behaviors which are addressed during the semester in different courses.

Career Goals

Students are very focused in terms of their career goals. Interestingly, there were only a few students who were not sure what they wanted to do in terms of their careers.

Repetitive career goals included specific populations, particular types of problems or special settings they wanted to work with. Students indicated that they wanted to work with populations-at-risk. These mainly included adolescents, the elderly, children, families and victims of domestic violence. Students identified a variety of types of problems they wanted to address including child abuse, disability care, substance abuse and youth crime. In addition, a wide range of settings were identified namely schools, hospitals, orphanages, adoption agencies, child protective services, criminal justice facilities and shelters. Some of the students majoring in other programs such as nursing or psychology were at a crossroad considering social work as a career option.

Table 1: NVivo 8 Project Model Data Presentation (Strengths, Characteristics and Challenges)



Narratives Related to Practice Behaviors

The responses were compared to the specific practice behaviors identified as part of EPAS 2.2.1. (Most often repeated responses).

Advocate for Client Access to the Services of Social Work;

The data reflected that students feel a need to advocate for clients in general.

“I believe that everyone deserves the right to grow up in a healthy environment and I am not afraid to fight for their right” and “Drive for community improvement”

Practice Personal Reflection and Self-Correction to Assure Continual Professional Development;

“Don’t like speaking in large groups”, “Very aggressive about what I believe”, “Getting attached and not understanding why”, “Am feel uncomfortable speaking in front of many people”, “I’m afraid I do not look professional” and “I feel too young”

Attend to Professional Roles and Boundaries

“Can be too hard on people at times”

Demonstrate Professional Demeanor in Behavior, Appearance, and Communication;

“I am good with people and I show respect for the person”, “Positive attitude”, “optimistic” and “Ability to emphasize”

Engage in Career-Long Learning;

“Eager to learn new information” and “Lifelong learner”

Use Supervision and Consultation

There were limited responses that were related to supervision and consultation.

Discussion

After reflection and examination of the themes, the authors are of the opinion that this educational strategy/exercise offer opportunities to engage BSW students in the classroom as they begin to perceive the educational process as a participatory event. Students identified their strengths and challenges and learned to take risk in self-disclosing personal information with others. The themes which emerged in class most often: **Strengths** - ‘non-judgmental’, ‘good listener’, ‘trustworthy’, ‘open-minded’, and **Challenges** –‘talkative’, ‘I tend to lecture rather than speaking directly’, ‘too friendly maybe I should toughen up’, ‘not being a perfectionist’, ‘need to take more of my own advice’, ‘I have a really soft heart and I need to toughen up’, ‘I have to work on myself before I help others’, ‘effected by others emotions’, ‘overwhelmed by things I cannot change’, ‘prioritizing time’, ‘think I am always right’, ‘sensitive’, ‘need not to judge people as quick as I do’, ‘become a better speaker’, ‘judgmental’, ‘giving advice’, ‘being more empathetic’, ‘quick to give advice’, ‘blunt and to the point’, ‘I can’t speak in front of crowds’, ‘being timely’, ‘stop being hypocritical’, ‘do not procrastinate’, ‘need more experience’, ‘need more time’.

When students were exposed to these themes they began to understand that their classmates have similar strengths and challenges, and often this content opens up a dialog and communication about how to start improving or reinforcing knowledge gained. Educators too can utilize these themes and content to encourage, guide, and empower students to take risk and engage in advising and mentoring relationships.

BSW students generally discuss wanting to become professional helpers, but struggle with how to combine knowledge, values, and skills and begin to apply the change process as a professional social worker. They are told they will become entry-level generalist social workers and must “Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly” (CSWE, 2008) but what are the tools to achieve this competency? Students must learn to use the strengths perspective on themselves before they can truly see the uniqueness and potential in clients and consumers. Social work educators must develop additional educational strategies and activities to help BSW realize their strengths and to confront and overcome challenges as we guide BSW students toward self-reflection and correction. Learning self-reflection is clearly an important process in educating students to move towards professional behavior. It is evident from the study that students are able to reflect on their own strengths and challenges. These reflections show repetitive themes and it is clear that students share some experiences that are the same.

Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

The mandate from CSWE is for undergraduate social work programs is to develop curriculum designs that guide BSW students toward professional behavior, following the 10 competencies and 41 corresponding practice behaviors of the Council on Social Work Education, (CSWE, 2008). Various educational strategies that can help enhance the student’s attainment of knowledge, values and skills and to practice self-reflection need to be further explored. We have presented one educational strategy/activity as an approach to help students develop competency in “Identifying as professional social workers and to conduct one-self accordingly”. Social workers must have self-awareness to be effective in professional practice, and the application of theory combined with the demonstration of professional skills development will be important to learning the change process (Reupert, 2009).

The educational setting mentioned by Yip (2006) will allow faculty and students to increase their ability to understand needs or challenges, improve awareness, critique knowledge and develop professional practice skills.

Further research will identify useful educational strategies and help programs achieve the level of competency for engaging BSW students in improving their critical thinking, oral communication, and active listening skills necessary for helping individuals, families, groups, communities and organizations.

The emphasis on the educational strategy suggested does not preclude the many self-reflective and awareness activities and tools already utilized, but rather emphasize and identify those strategies that work best as BSW students begin to assess strengths and challenges. Exploring self-reflection enables social work educators to identify specific educational issues to be addressed in class. By using self-reflection both students and educators can gain from the process and outcomes of ongoing research. Social work educators can use reflective exercises to enhance student's insight towards their own strengths and limitations. Self-reflection as in this specific project provides an excellent opportunity for program assessment. By collecting pre and post-test data based on the self-reflective exercises, social work educators can assess change brought about by specific course content.

Social work educators can benefit from the process by means of a parallel learning process. For instance, in this research study one of the authors used the information to gain knowledge about his role as an educator. Students can benefit by developing an understanding of their own strengths and limitations. By using the self-reflection early on in the program, students are able to build on their initial awareness.

It is envisioned that the data will be used to develop an assessment instrument to assess professional behavior in students. Specific items identified include (1) behavior that creates challenges in professional behavior (2) experiences creating problematic boundaries (3) previous experience with social workers (4) opportunities to build professionalism.

The use of an assessment instrument to evaluate Educational Policy 2.1.1 "Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly" and the practice behaviors related to this specific standard will be a step forward towards addressing the implementation of EPAS. The data on reflective exercises could be used to build and enhance curriculum content. The application of course content is unique to a specific semester and student group. By using the data to assess the specific student group, the social work educator can adapt course content to the specific needs of the students. In terms of study's outcomes related to professional behavior, it is suggested that social work educators address the following important issues related to competencies:

- Build on the strengths identified by the specific student group.
- Address the limitations by means of generalization as well as self-reflection.
- Address fears as it specifically relates to professional behavior by means of role-plays and case study discussions.
- Use the positive aspects of emotions to build on students' strengths.
- Use the strong motivational drive exhibited by students to promote the process of learning professional behavior (through signature pedagogy).
- Effectively utilize the experiences students describe to build professional behavior.
- Enhance knowledge about values and norms and link them with specific professional behaviors.
- Work towards strengthening specific characteristics (generalized by students).
- Use ongoing self-awareness to influence the learning process.
- Identify feelings of inadequateness which all students can relate to.
- Address issues related to boundaries by means of modeling and case studies.
- Challenge students to step out of their comfort zones.

Conclusion

The study provided evidence about the challenges and limitations students experience in the BSW program. It enabled the authors to reflect on how learning takes place and how self-reflection can be taught in the classroom and used towards the accomplishment of competency EPAS 2.1.1. The personal reflection exercise offers students an opportunity to Identify as a professional social worker, begin to identify values related to strengths and challenges. This process involves critical thinking and attending to professional roles and boundaries (CSWE 2008). We suggest that social work educators create learning environments that are interactive and participatory (Urdang 2010) and allow students the opportunity to explore personal values and disclose concerns related to professional behavior. This exercise allows students to become self-evaluators and develop a process for managing and solving situational and unforeseen problems in social work practice.

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