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*"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"*

**AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO TEACHING THE INTEGRATION  
OF SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL WORK**

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# **An Experiential Approach to Teaching the Integration of Spirituality and Social Work**

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In the past few decades, the social work profession has experienced a renewed interest in the role of spirituality in professional practice (Canda, 2005; Canda & Furman, 1999). Course offerings in social work programs related to spirituality and religion have expanded at both the graduate and undergraduate levels and many researchers have been studying the integration of social work and spirituality. Social workers have always stressed the bio-psycho-social aspects of a client system in both assessment and intervention and the spiritual aspect is now a standard part of those processes. Numerous books have been written on spiritual issues and the use of spirituality in professional practice, and nearly all social work practice textbooks have at least a chapter dedicated to issues related to religion and spirituality.

In 1994 the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) contributed to this development by including religion in its definition of diversity and requiring schools of social work to address religion as part of diversity content throughout the curriculum. Furthermore, the NASW code of ethics mandates social workers to attend to the religious needs of clients and to confront religious oppression and discrimination.

This change for social work parallels the general public's hunger for deeper meaning and purpose in life. With the various changes in society such as the emphasis on individuality, the fast pace and stressful lifestyle that most face, the changing family structure, and the violence that surrounds us, people are left looking for something more (Walsh and Pryce, 2003; Zastrow, 1999). For many, this something is found in their religion or spirituality.

The positive benefits of religion/spirituality cannot be denied. Religious beliefs have been shown to enhance physical and mental health outcomes (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Levin (1994)). In addition, religious and spiritual practices have been associated with an ability to successfully overcome suffering and to improve recovery (Burns & Smith, 1991; Isaia, Parker & Morrow, 1999; Richards & Bergin, 1997).

Social workers and physicians alike attest to the advantages of faith and religion for patients (Waring, 2000). A study of nearly 150 social workers in North Dakota found that a third of these workers encountered issues of religion and spirituality on a frequent basis in practice (Furman & Chandy, 1994). A national survey of professional social workers found that many believe it is acceptable to use interventions that are spiritual in nature and the majority admitted to actually using spirituality as a resource in practice. For example, these social workers have used spiritual language with clients, have recommended participation in a religious or spiritual support system or activity, and have helped a client to consider the spiritual meaning and purpose of his/her current life situation (Canda & Furman, 1999).

In spite of the benefits of a greater focus on a client's spiritual needs and resources, schools of social work have been slow to respond to their role in preparing practitioners to incorporate these issues in practice. One survey of social work faculty members revealed that although over three-fourths of these faculty members believe that courses related to spirituality and practice should be utilized, but nearly nine out of ten of the faculty members surveyed had little or any training related to this integration (Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994). Some authors have declared that social work programs must accept responsibility for educating students regarding different religious and spiritual beliefs of their client (Canda, 1989; Furman 1994; Zastrow, 1999), yet schools of social work have not met the call to prepare social workers for this integration (Barker, 2007; Dudley & Helfgott, 1990; Miller, 2001; Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994).

#### The Social Work Program at Franciscan University

The social work program at Franciscan University of Steubenville has nearly fifty student majors. The overwhelming majority of these social work students are Catholic and they are strongly committed to their faith. In fact, they view Catholicism as the ultimate and true religion. These students obviously and admittedly intend to incorporate their faith in practice, so teaching these students how to incorporate and integrate faith/spirituality in practice is uniquely challenging. Because of their often limited perspective on other religions, helping them to be more accepting of and less biased toward other belief systems and lifestyles related to those belief systems presents a quandary for faculty members. Nevertheless, faculty members made a conscious decision to confront these issues by specifically addressing them.

An elective course was seen as one avenue beyond the typical efforts that are utilized in the classroom across the curriculum to help students learn to effectively manage this integration. Since most view Catholicism as the one true religion, an approach that would primarily focus on learning about and understanding other religions was quickly ruled out in favor of an experiential approach. The instructional methods concentrated on the transfer of learning that would be necessary for students to apply the information learned in the classroom to the practice setting.

#### The Experiential Approach

Lecture was definitely employed in this elective course, albeit on a limited basis, even though the instructor was aware that students often crave this instructional approach because of its familiarity. The experiential approach included various activities and assignments, both in and outside the classroom. Students were informed on the first day of class that the course was being taught in a somewhat unique manner so that they were prepared for the approach. The activities and assignments utilized in the course are briefly discussed below. Even though many of these methods are common in the classroom, the difference in our course was that it was overwhelmingly driven by experiential activities so that students could deal with the material on both an intellectual and emotional level.

Students were asked to visit a house of worship with which they were unfamiliar, and one that they had not previously visited. They were expected to reflect on the experience and to compare and contrast the service with a typical Catholic mass. Finally, they were to outline how they might use this experience as a professional.

Another assignment required students to complete a spiritual self-assessment/spiritual history. They were asked to trace the origin of their beliefs and those persons who contributed to their spiritual/faith development. In addition, they had to explain how they currently experience their faith and how that impacts their personal and professional life. This assignment was seen as necessary to their understanding of faith/spiritual development and recognition that others might

have very different experiences. It was also seen as important to their understanding of their own beliefs and how difficult it could be to have others deny their beliefs.

In order to practice assessment techniques related to spiritual assessment, students actually had to interview someone that they knew had a faith journey very different from their own. This activity was conducted after several assessment approaches had been presented in class. Students could create their own approach or utilize one of the previously established approaches. After doing the assessment, the student had to reflect on the experience and how they might improve in future assessments. They also had to reflect on their personal reaction to the interviewee's journey and how this type of activity would be useful to them in practice.

One final assignment had students work in groups. Each group had to choose a religion or faith tradition and present information about its major tenets, common practices and rituals and book(s) of sacred scripture. These presentations were focused on how this information would be useful for social work practitioners working with individuals from this religion or faith. This was seen as instrumental to student learning about other faiths/religions, particularly because they have generally had little exposure to other belief systems. This exercise was also seen as a vehicle for identifying the similarities of various faiths/religions as opposed to looking for the differences. In so doing, students would hopefully overcome some of their potential bias and develop an appreciation for the uniqueness of other faiths/religions.

Each week students were given a quote or passage from scripture and they had to hand in a written reflection on it. This necessitated critical thinking and forced them to examine their assumptions and biases. Further, through class discussion, they were exposed to other interpretations, and hopefully this expanded their understanding.

In the classroom students were frequently forced to examine their beliefs and how their beliefs might conflict with their ability to serve diverse clients. These discussions focused on a person's commitment to a belief system as well as how faith/spirituality can serve as a resource for individuals and families.

On a weekly basis students were given hypothetical situations that they might encounter with clients. These situations were used to help students make decisions about how they would proceed with clients in similar situations as well as how they would handle their personal feelings. It was clear that students often struggled as they tried to reconcile their personal values and professional obligations. Many admitted to difficulty remaining objective and non-judgmental. The instructor framed these situations as opportunities for self awareness and professional development.

Videos of situations that presented ethical dilemmas related to faith/spirituality were also used in the classroom. Once again students had to critically think about the situations, reflect on their personal feelings and make decisions. In these situations students were forced to make a decision and could not take a neutral position, especially when it was obvious they were out of their comfort zone. Students were reminded that they would likely feel uncomfortable in practice situations and therefore they could not avoid these feelings, now or then.

As explained several different kinds of exercises and assignments were utilized. Students were compelled to learn through somewhat unconventional rather than more traditional methods, especially for our program.

#### Student Evaluations of the Course

Thirteen students enrolled in the course, which is a typical number for a course offered through our social work program. The class was an elective course which met a requirement for one of three required social work electives.

The instructor developed an evaluation especially designed for this course. This was done so that the instructor could gather specific information rather than the standardized information that is used in most courses at the university. Students were given extra credit for completing the evaluation, which they completed through narrative responses to a series of questions. The evaluation forms were completed on one of the last class days.

The student evaluations yielded largely positive findings. In response to the major lessons learned in the course, students offered that they realized that religions actually share many similar values and that trying to be objective about other faith practices can be difficult. This latter response was one of the reasons that the course was developed for our students. Clearly most students found the social history/spirituals self-assessment useful in better understanding their beliefs and how this might affect their practice with clients. Finally, the assignment requiring the students to conduct a spiritual assessment of someone else was favorably received and students found it particularly helpful for preparation for professional practice.

Student responses regarding suggestions for improving the course actually produced mixed results in that what some students found helpful others did not. Students seemed evenly split regarding the utility of the spiritual quotes and scripture passages as well as the need for additional speakers from diverse religions. Some students suggested that spending more time discussing the quotes would have been more meaningful. In fairness to the students, there were times that we did not address the weekly quote or passage due to time constraints. Some students expressed discomfort with amount of self-exploration that was required. Some students wanted more information on other faith traditions, although at least 5 major faith traditions were covered in some length.

Students offered the following general comments about the course: “Yes, we learned how to professionally deal with clients we don’t agree with.” One student, in discussing the major lessons learned, stated, “I learned I want to be in a Catholic agency.” Another student offered “I think discussing how to approach various faith traditions in different settings, such as mental health, would have been useful.” Even though we practiced skills for interacting with individuals and families from faith traditions different from our Catholic faith, student apprehension about utilizing their skills was obvious and on-going. Interestingly the material that was provided through lecture, such as the models of faith development, was given little attention in the evaluations even though students were free to include any and all material covered in their responses.

### Recommendations

The first offering of a course always presents unique challenges and some suggestions for improving the course are indicated. The use of role plays should be increased to give students additional practice experience. Students clearly desire more practice in the classroom to boost their confidence and sense of competence, although it is possible they are seeking a sense of self efficacy that is beyond that which can be obtained from one course on spiritual integration. Another suggestion relates to incorporating the value of supervision for integrating spirituality in practice. Although supervision is a topic that is common in social work education, we did not spend sufficient time on supervision as it relates to the integration process. Finally, greater attention must be given to the role of agency policy in promoting and supporting this integration.

### Conclusion

Students definitely accomplished the majority of the course objectives according to student evaluations and their performance on exams and assignments. In particular they became more familiar with and accepting of other faith traditions. They were able to identify and

concentrate on the similarities of various faiths/religions rather than focusing just on the differences. All of the students became more aware of their own faith development and how it influences them both personally and professionally. Students acknowledged the value conflicts inherent in the integration process and learned how to begin to ethically integrate spirituality and religion in practice. Finally, students did gain knowledge and skills related to spiritual assessment and integration of faith/religion in practice.

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