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USING ROLE-PLAY TO TEACH COMPETENCIES FOR ACQUIRING BEHAVIORS AS A SOCIAL WORKER

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Abstract

This workshop session will share the methods used to facilitate hands-on learning for baccalaureate level students for acquiring behaviors and skills needed in interviewing clients. Infusion of professional behavior content into baccalaureate social work curriculum has received increased consideration recently as a vital component of competency based programs. This presentation will explore the experiences of faculty who designed this student assignment and the experiences of undergraduate social work students who experienced both the roles of interviewing a hypothetical client as well as the students who assumed the role of the client. Students acquired the behaviors needed for professional social work identity as well as skills in empathizing with clients entering the helping relationship process.

Using Role-Play to Teach Competencies for Acquiring Behaviors as a Social Worker

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has identified ten core competencies for baccalaureate social work programs to teach and train students. Along with these competencies are identified practice behaviors designed to prepare graduates to demonstrate integration and application in working with individuals, families, groups, organizations or communities.

Huntington University is a competency-based program directed by Dr. Carla MacDonald and joined by Amy Biegel, MSW, LCSW.

Dr. Carla MacDonald has been teaching at Huntington University for seven years. MacDonald's responsibilities include oversight of the social work program, direction of field placement for senior practicum students, advisement of multiple social work majors and instruction of courses. Prior to Huntington University, MacDonald served as Vice President for Client Services at Pathfinder Services for over 25 years. She holds degrees in social work, business, and organizational leadership.

Amy Biegel has recently joined Huntington University full-time in July of 2012. Prior to that, Biegel instructed an adjunct course for the university's graduate counseling program. Biegel has served as a clinical director and founder of Life Matters Counseling, mental health consultant for Early Head Start and Head Start, child and adolescent therapist for Life Center Counseling Services and case manager for The Villages, Inc. She holds a Bachelor's degree in social work and psychology from and a Master's degree in social work.

Huntington University is a four-year, residential Christian liberal arts university located in Huntington, Indiana. The university was founded in 1897 and is a member of the Council for

Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Huntington University provides a Christ-centered education with over seventy majors.

The Huntington University Social Work (BSW) program was granted initial accreditation in February 2009 by the Commission on Accreditation of Social Work Education (CSWE). Accreditation was retroactive to the date of candidacy which was February 2006. The program has produced 38 graduates since its first graduating class in 2007. All graduates have either obtained active employment as a practicing social worker or admission into graduate school following completion of their degree.

Intercultural Experience Orientation (SW391) and Interview Workshop (SW445) are two courses within the Huntington University program that heavily utilizes the practice/model of role-play to teach competencies. These courses are taken by students in their junior and senior year and require students to participate in two very different roles, both granting opportunities to expand and enhance typical classroom learning.

A brief literature review warrants the consideration of incorporating experiential learning exercises like role-play into undergraduate education. Barr and Tagg (1995) discuss a paradigm shift among universities from a previously accepted approach of providing instruction to a revised model to guide and produce learning. Referred to as a *Learning Paradigm*, universities or programs within universities seek approaches that provide active learning experiences versus passive ones. The traditional model within higher education is primarily lecture format, where the instructor is in the role of dispersing information. Within the *Learning Paradigm*, instructors facilitate structured and planned opportunities where the students gain knowledge and, hopefully, deeper insight on a specific topic in addition to the traditional lecture formats.

There are several proposed benefits of the *Learning Paradigm*. One is that the responsibility shifts from the instructor to feed learning instead to the student-based responsibility to gain learning through experiencing. Another benefit is that students gain practice skills that are expected upon the completion of the degree. Instead of simply filling a student with knowledge, the *Learning Paradigm* produces graduates with a preparedness in knowledge and skill. Lastly, the *Learning Paradigm* offers a higher accountability for achievement as evidenced by assessments of students and faculty (Barr & Tagg, 1995, pp. 12-14).

Flipping the classroom is an educational approach that has been given more attention in the last decade as universities discover the need to serve larger groups of students in a more engaging fashion (Barrett, 2012). In this approach, students are expected to do reading outside of the class and instructors come prepared with active learning exercises designed to enhance and deepen understanding. Because knowledge today is so easily attainable through technology, classroom flipping provides a unique environment where students are challenged to apply knowledge rather than attain and instructors are asked to model it versus dispense it.

After recognizing a troubling trend that baccalaureate social work students were resisting practicing with the aging population, Sowbeland Ernst (2005) proposed that students be required to interact with and interview older adults as a part of their undergraduate education. Intentions of this proposal were to ready students for the need within the field to work with this growing population group. In order to gather data, Sowbel and Ernst incorporated students interviewing older adults on three different occasions, producing three written documents accordingly and then conducted an inductive analysis to determine results. The authors indicated success when these interviews provided practice scenarios for students to build confidence in their

generalist skills and become more familiarized with a specific population group (Sowbel& Ernst, 2005).

A study on interdisciplinary role play attempted to evaluate social work students' experience when practicing interviewing skills with mock clients. The study utilized MSW students in two different role-play scenarios – one group with social work students playing the role of the mock client and a second group where undergraduate theater majors fulfilled the roles of the mock clients. Results showed that MSW students perceived more realism of the scenarios when they were paired with theater students. But, it is important to note that the first group, who were paired with fellow social work students, reported benefits of an opportunity to practice skills, gain advanced interviewing skills, empathize with both the social worker and client role and gain feedback of skills through tape review. Findings indicate a further advancement of these benefits when mock clients were played by well-prepared theater students (Dennison, 2011, pp. 415-430).

The benefits of aforementioned *Learning Paradigm* correlate well with the CSWE's competencies for baccalaureate social work programs. The Learning Paradigm begins habits for students to dictate and drive their education and establishes regular opportunities for students to practice skills. According to CSWE, competency number one for social work students is to "Identify oneself as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly." Another competency is, "Applying critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments." Yet another states the goal of helping students "Engage, assess, intervene and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, etc," (CSWE, 2008). Further concentration on each competency illustrates practice behaviors for students to engage fully in the learning process. The Council on Social Work Education is not only anticipating but requiring accredited

baccalaureate programs to produce competent knowledge and practice behaviors. This, in and of itself, is indication that instructors must incorporate active learning experiences in the education process.

At Huntington University, junior level students are required to take a course entitled Intercultural Experience Orientation (SW391). A major assignment of this class is for the student to take on the role of a mock client, as prescribed by their professor. Students are graded on the level of empathy displayed and the observed level of sensitivity to the client's challenges being faced. A reflection paper is also written by the students as a foundation for grading this assignment along with instructor observations. These junior are directly addressing the CSWE competency purposed to "Engage diversity and difference practice," (CSWE, 2008).

Following the completion of this assignment, juniors were asked to reflect upon their position as a mock client. They were given opportunities to provide feedback in an anonymous fashion, in hopes that honest data could be collected for evaluating the effectiveness of the role-play assignment. One junior said,

"I learned that it is easy to say that our clients are oppressed, depressed, sad, frustrated, at the end of their rope, whatever but it is a whole different feeling to feel it. In the classroom, we can act like we know how our clients will feel but in reality living through it is so much different. Role playing a client was a huge advantage to even feeling slightly like our clients will feel. Being able to remember a little bit of how I felt in that situation will make me a better social worker when I face clients feeling the way I did."

It should be noted that this particular junior revealed her identity and shared about her client role.

As a heterosexual student from an evangelical Christian background, she was asked to play the

role of a lesbian in a relationship with another fellow classmate – an identity that made her uncomfortable at the start. By the end of the role-play experience, she discovered a more personal manner to feel empathy for her potential future clients.

Seniors are then required to take a course entitled Interview Workshop (SW445) where they practice a number of in-class role plays and conduct two taped interviews with their respective mock client(s). After both taped interviews, students are expected to review the tape and complete a self-evaluation of skills. These elements provide students with an opportunity to practice the competency directed for students to “Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly,” (CSWE, 2008). Students then make appointments with the respective professor to watch the tape again and reflect on skills demonstrated. For the first taped interview, skills evaluated include basic nonverbal and verbal attending skills and empathy demonstration. Students self-evaluate skills and the professor evaluates student skills and grades are compiled in consideration of both as well as student acceptance of supervisor feedback. Following this first interview, senior students must also produce a psychosocial assessment in written form.

On the second experience, senior students meet with the same mock client(s) for practice of more advanced skills. During this taped interview, students will gather information to complete a treatment plan. In addition to forming goals and a plan for social work practice with this mock client, seniors are required to also complete either a genogram or an ecomap. These written assignments are meant to directly reflect the CSWE’s competency number ten, “Engage, assess, intervene and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, etc.”(CSWE, 2008). In addition to the written assignments, students are again required to self-evaluate their

interviewing skills and properly receive supervisory input from the review of the taped interview with their professor.

One senior student reportedly enjoyed the role-plays, stating it gave her the opportunity to practice what she was learning. She stated,

“Participating in role-plays has definitely been beneficial in my graduate studies. We have similar assignments where we do mock-interviews in order to strengthen our skills and reflect upon strengths and limitations that may appear in interviews....it has helped me become more comfortable when I have had the opportunity to work with and communicate with clients throughout my practicum placements.”

A classmate of hers, who is also now in graduate school, expressed similar appreciation for the experience. She shared that her new graduate school classmates were very nervous at the idea of doing mock interviews, but she felt prepared because of the experience she had at Huntington University in the Interview Workshop class. In addition, this particular student noted that the written assignment portions of the role-plays (i.e. psychosocial assessment, treatment plan and genogram/ecomap) were very helpful. Specifically, she reported,

“The assignment also taught me about pathology. I remember one of my clients had Major Depressive Disorder. Now, when I am seeing clients, I find it easier to recognize depression because I have somewhat seen it and have looked up/studied the disorder to diagnose my client....Overall, I think the assignment was beneficial and taught me things I could not have learned in a classroom setting. I would highly recommend the assignment.”

Through the partnership with Huntington University's graduate counseling program, social work students are granted permission to utilize the on-campus counseling clinic, known as Life Spring. This clinic houses multiple meeting rooms, all equipped with recording devices for both audio and video. Senior students draw numbers, which assigns them to a case scenario. They are given a small, one-paragraph description of the purpose of their interview and the number of participants. Junior students also draw numbers, which assigns them to a scenario and an interviewing senior. Juniors are given information about their assumed need for social work services, as well as a few pieces of information to reveal within their interview time (see Appendix for case scenario example). Juniors are asked to represent a variety of people groups, in effort to help both sets of students to prepare to work with clients from a diverse set of backgrounds. When asked for additional information, junior students are instructed to answer with any information they wish; however, they must remember the information given so they can fully participate in the second interview as the same mock client with the same mock concerns.

Throughout the Interview Workshop (SW445) course, students are given multiple opportunities to practice role-play with their classmates. In fact, many of the in-class assignments are direct reflections of what is required of the above mentioned larger assignment. This is intertwined with the course content in effort to prepare students for practicum, the senior competency examination, graduation, and the profession of social work in general.

In conclusion, the social work teaching faculty at Huntington University has developed a passion to enhance students' knowledge and skill base. In effort to enhance multi-faceted learning in this way, we have adopted role-play as an essential element in students' educational process.

Appendix

Case Scenario Example for Students

Client Scenario #4

Senior Student:

In working for Stop Local Hunger, Inc., you receive many anonymous calls. Recently, you have taken several calls about the same family, who reportedly is in dire shape. The Hendricks family lives just down the road from your agency. Today, they have stopped in your office to ask about your services. You will need to gather a complete history in order to determine if they qualify for your program.

-----CUT ALONG LINES-----

Junior Students: *requires 3 students*

Please remember this assignment is worth a big grade for the seniors. Do your best to play the part seriously and keep acting “details” to a minimum. If you are asked a question and you do not have an answer scripted for you, then you are free to make up an answer. However, you will be expected to remember that information from the first interview to the second. It might be best if you thought ahead about your client’s scenario rather than make it up on the spot. Also, please use your real first names. It is one less thing for everyone to remember. Have fun!

Client Scenario #4

Mrs. Hendricks – You are a Hispanic woman who moved to Indiana to work for seasonal farming work. You are hesitant to seek government services because you are not an American citizen and are afraid to be deported, but you are struggling to feed your family since the crops didn’t produce well this year. During the interview, you can show your apprehension by asking why the social worker needs to know such personal information; however, at some point, you must reveal that you are an illegal immigrant. You are the primary client and do most of the speaking. The social worker is going to talk to you about your ability or inability to feed your family.

Child #1: You are a fifteen year old daughter of Mrs. Hendricks. You are three months pregnant and experiencing a lot of morning sickness for the last six weeks, which is causing you to miss school. The school is putting pressure on you saying they will report you to probation if you continue to miss classes without a doctor’s excuse. You are protective of your Mom and do not want her to share about the family secret about immigration status (but you will allow her to reveal it at some point in the interview). You can help your Mom answer questions, but know that she must answer the majority.

Child #2: You are a very quiet and withdrawn son/daughter at the elementary age. You will say very little in the interview except that you miss your Dad, who went away for more work. At one point in the interview, you can make a small distraction saying that you are bored to give the social worker a chance to show you empathy.

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