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Learning Outside the Box: How to Incorporate an Experiential Service-Learning Project Encompassing Implicit and Explicit Curriculum in Rural Areas

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Abstract. The theoretical basis of this teaching pedagogy combines infusion methodology with experiential learning. The infusion method addresses two areas which faculty specifically wanted to include: critical thinking and problem-solving skills. A comparable project by Young, Lee and Kovacs (2016) also used experiential learning and stated, “university student engagement in service-learning type activities has been shown to have an impact on students’ beliefs, attitudes, and values, particularly related to working with older adults” (p. 2). As a measurement of explicit curricula and core competencies, the students developed a portfolio with content prescribed to meet CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) one through nine. The portfolio may also be used as a tool to demonstrate various social work practice tasks when the student graduates and is actively seeking employment in the profession. To evince evaluation skills, students had to complete a summative evaluation of the project and compose a presentation for the key stakeholders (long term residents and staff, social work faculty and staff, and university administration) indicating how this project took place, how success was evaluated, and how future classes can build upon this project to continue the community partnership and provide sustainable service learning activities on an ongoing basis.

Keywords: rural social work, rural social work education, geriatric social work

Faculty designed the syllabi for this project, incorporating social work practice skills with individuals, families, and groups. The goal was to create a project that utilized various methods of instruction to assess student competency in the 2015 EPAS. Faculty wanted to integrate an experiential service-learning project that could increase critical thinking skills, give students practical experience in an area of social work that they might not normally choose, and provide a service that would benefit the social work program, university, and the rural communities surrounding the university. Lastly, faculty wanted to choose a setting that would allow students to obtain experience in an area of practice that was reflective of future employment growth.

Student Focused

One challenge within the traditional classroom setting for this university is the quantity of non-traditional students. Per the American Council on Education (2019), “sixty percent of today’s undergraduate college students are post-traditional learners” (para. 1). Many students are adult learners who are returning to school while tending to competing life responsibilities. Their learning needs within the classroom are as varied as their lifestyles. Some students may respond better to traditional classroom teaching methods utilizing texts and/or technology enhanced teaching through a learning management system. Both traditional and non-traditional social work students prefer learning by doing, whether via simulation, role-plays, and/or experiential learning opportunities (Cantor, 1995; Downey & Miles, 2005; Logie, Bogo, Regehr & Regehr, 2013).
For the initial offering of this experiential service-learning project, faculty decided that, all levels of practice activities would take place at a local nursing facility with whom the social work program has a long-standing relationship. It was necessary to have a community partner who was willing to work with students and faculty as the project evolved. Having students in one agency within close proximity allowed faculty to respond to on-going formative evaluation and adjust accordingly to ensure students had an opportunity to address all micro and mezzo practice objectives.

Because of student feedback, subsequent offerings of the project were adapted as requested by students. As a circumstance of being a regional public university surrounded by rural communities, many of the students may commute more than fifty miles to attend class. In order to address this challenge, students could request permission to complete the portions of the project related to social work practice with individuals and families in their home communities. If students did not live within close proximity to a nursing facility, then they could contact the local senior center.

Geriatric Focused

As social workers in rural communities, Brown, Walters, Jones and Akinsola (2017) note that practitioners must have a generalist, or advanced generalist, knowledge base in order to access services for the community with little to no availability of resources. For example, in a rural community, even if a social work student indicates a preference to work only with children, they are likely to have a practice situation where they would need to work with a child’s grandparents, Area Agency on Aging, or other resources. Generalist practitioners may have an interest in serving only children; however, if they are working in rural areas, they must be comfortable working with consumers of all ages. The faculty designed this course as a way to encourage students to gather practice knowledge in multiple settings with various populations, noting that they are in the safety of a learning environment. Accordingly, the faculty felt that this provided students an opportunity to be creative, step out of their comfort zone, and try areas of practice that might not be their first choice.

Faculty decided to utilize a long-term nursing facility as the best setting to allow master of social work (MSW) students to address both the curricula (implicit and explicit) and core competencies as required by the CSWE (2015). This also enabled the students to engage in different community activities, which allowed them to explore practice areas that might not be their current primary interest area. This decision was based on a review of the literature, specifically, Downey and Miles (2005) note that “society’s negative attitudes about and derogatory stereotypes of older adults contribute to the fact that many social work students enter college with prejudicial attitudes toward aging due in part to their limited experience with older adults” (p. 96). Since career opportunities for social workers are expected to grow 16% faster than other areas of social work by the year 2026 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018), faculty decided that an immersion project would be one way to prepare students for geriatric-practice.

Community Focused

As often experienced by regional public universities surrounded by rural areas, the university has a strategic initiative to expand regional stewardship. The university’s mission
coupled with the program’s goals provided the foundation for the approval of the implementation of this service-learning project.

Once learning objectives for the students were developed, the focus then shifted to locating a geriatric centric community setting that would allow the students to fill a void in social work service and be appropriate for replication. Preexisting relationships with agencies in the surrounding communities, provided faculty possible experiential settings. A study by Bowblis, Meng, and Hyer (2013) reviewed disparities between rural and urban long-term nursing facilities. The authors attributed half of the inequalities to facilities and equipment, crediting a portion of the difference to staffing, or the lack thereof (Bowblis, Meng, & Hyer, 2013).

Vourlekis, Zlotnick, and Simons (2005) noted that many smaller and rural long-term nursing facilities often have difficulty attracting and retaining a full-time social worker. They concluded that one of the best ways to combat this is to create partnerships between universities and long-term nursing facilities to foster relationships between the geriatric agencies and the students. These findings provided the impetus for choosing a local long-term nursing facility. The faculty implemented projects that took place in a variety of rural communities where students resided.

Task Focused

The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare issued twelve tasks in their Grand Challenges for Social Work; one of these is to eradicate social isolation (Fong, Lubben, & Barth, 2018). Although one would not think of a long-term care resident as being socially isolated, many are, due to the lack of visitors (either they do not have family/friends or the family/friends are unable/unwilling to visit) or they are isolated to their room as a result of physical/mental limitations. Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009) studied the connections between perceived social isolation (loneliness) and cognitive performance. Other studies have concluded that loneliness is associated with dementia, such as a ten-year longitudinal study completed by Sutin, Stephan, Luchetti and Terracciano (2018).

Because of these findings, the goal was to identify nursing home residents who were at high-risk for social isolation. When speaking to the Social Services Director of the local facility, faculty specifically requested that the residents with whom the students were assigned be those who had very little socialization opportunities. This could be due to lack of family interaction, limited mobility, or self-isolation. These targeted residents could have a diagnosis of dementia, but must have been capable of granting consent to participate in the project. The resident also had to have the ability to converse and interact with students in order to complete the goals and objectives regarding social work practice with individuals.

Generalist Social Work Skills

Students provided socialization to the residents while practicing the skills of engaging, assessing, and intervening with individuals and families in a rural long-term health care facility. First, students had to be accepted by the long-term care facility and the resident. Interviews and background screenings were conducted, calendars were submitted, and students had to exhibit basic communication and documentation skills to complete the volunteer process in a timely manner. Critical thinking and problem-solving tactics were utilized in developing calendars that
ensured a student could complete the requirements, and hours were committed around additional responsibilities, such as family, work, and school.

If a student was not successful at passing a background check, critical thinking and problem-solving skills were utilized as the student was tasked with developing an alternative setting that could still allow them to meet the required learning objectives. Students learned how to advocate for themselves, as noted with the addition of being able to utilize a geriatric setting with the student’s local environment. In addition, students often indicated in their weekly journals how they had advocated for residents. Social work advocacy and policy development were demonstrated when one student had a resident who had recently moved to the facility. The resident was having a difficult time with the transition and felt the facility needed a ‘welcome wagon’ to assist new residents. Together, the student and the resident developed a policy and procedure proposal to create a service that would allow the resident to be notified of new admissions (if consent was given), meet the new resident and mentor the new resident as they became acclimated to the new environment. The student and resident met with the social services and admissions personnel to create the Resident Greeting Program.

Students demonstrated how to be ethical and professional practitioners. Initial journal entries from students immediately following the syllabus review, which included a description of the service-learning project in a long-term care facility, indicated various reasons for not wanting to work with the elderly or in this type of practice setting. However, even the students with misgivings performed as professional social workers throughout the project and did not exhibit personal biases.

**Individuals and families**

Just as elderly individuals benefited from socialization with the students, the families of the residents also benefitted knowing that there would be increased contact for a finite amount of time where an additional person would be checking in on his/her family member and giving weekly or bi-weekly phone updates, if requested. These tasks could help students demonstrate the knowledge and skills for EPAS 3. Students could advocate for the family to the facility staff if needed or if students are advocating on behalf of his/her resident.

Upon receiving the name of his or her assigned resident, the student was to engage the resident and establish a relationship. Once the facility and the resident gave their permission to contact the family, students were to call and arrange a family assessment. Students were also given the option to be able to complete their family assessments via telephone if families lived a great distance from the facility and were unable/unwilling to schedule a meeting at the facility. Students were not required to complete the resident’s initial psychosocial assessment in conjunction with the family assessment. However, it was noted that if students discovered their resident had dementia it might be beneficial to have the family assist with completing the initial psychosocial assessment. One of the case notes, written in SOAP (subjective, objective, assessment, and plan) format, was used to document the actual family meeting/call.

Unfortunately, not all families chose to participate, or there have been no family available to participate. Students were required to document all attempts to contact the resident’s family in their journals. For some students, the inability to contact family caused difficulties in completing
assignments required for the portfolio. For some, this not only created a sense of not being in control, but also anger and frustration towards the family. It also provided an opportunity for faculty to address how social workers can sometimes have these feelings, monitor how the student dealt with these feelings, and see if the student could still problem solve to find alternative ways to obtain information. Students whose residents had no family support or had families who did not follow through with appointments, used research techniques and performed chart reviews and/or staff interviews to acquire data to ascertain if the information given by the resident was reliable.

Students performed generalist social work tasks with their resident as they learned them in the classroom. Following the initial biopsychosocial assessment, the students worked with the resident to create goals with measurable objectives and progress had to be monitored in every SOAP note. From the beginning, students were encouraged to stress the time limits of the project, a planned date of discharge. Of course, not all discharges are planned, and issues of grief and unplanned termination were addressed for both individuals and families utilizing cognitive and affective processes.

The requirements for the social work practice with individuals and families portfolio are as follows:

- Students must complete 10 hours of volunteer service in a Long-Term Care Facility exhibiting ethical professional social work behavior (EPAS 1-Values/Skills);
- Student will be assigned a geriatric resident and make weekly visits of at least 30 minutes each for a minimum of 10 visits (EPAS 2-Values/Skills);
- The student is to engage the resident in a relationship, maintain the relationship, and terminate the relationship (EPAS 6-Skills);
- Students will have one initial bio-psycho-social assessment for the individual and one initial bio-psycho-social assessment for the family (EPAS 7-Skills);
- Students should work with the resident to create a case plan, or intervention (EPAS 8-Skills) to include at least one measurable goal and corresponding objectives; at a minimum four case notes; and one termination note documenting which goals and objectives were met and the status of unmet goals and transfer of responsibility to facility staff if appropriate (evaluation) (EPAS 9-Skills);
- The student submits a weekly journal entry of the visits reflecting the student’s feelings, summary of the visits, his/her cultural sensitivity, and the nature of termination. (EPAS 2-Value/Affective); and
- At the end of the course, students will write a paper describing the activities completed and demonstrate competence by correlating the activities to knowledge acquired in the learning environment (evaluate) (EPAS 9-Knowledge).
Groups

Acting as a task group, students researched the stages of dementia and submitted a proposal, which contained activities that could feasibly be implemented (budget and time constraints) for each stage. Each group was required to explain why these interventions were appropriate. Each group demonstrated their proposed activities to the facility resident council, who chose one activity from each stage of dementia. Each student then submitted individual evaluations of every member of their group (including themselves). The evaluations requested students to indicate roles of group members and types of interactions/response to interactions. Students also used journals to describe how the group progressed through phases and what was learned or accomplished in each phase. These items allowed students to exhibit competence for EPAS 4 (Research), but also the practice competencies related to groups (EPAS 6-9).

As a collective, the entire class had nine to 16 days following the resident council meeting to assign roles/tasks, gather supplies, fund/find prizes, or whatever else was needed to implement the activities at the long-term care facility. An individual’s group role may have changed from the smaller group, and students were once again asked to discuss in their journal and evaluate both the collective group and the project as a whole.

The project is implemented annually on the Saturday before Thanksgiving and activities are provided for the entire facility, not just the residents with whom the students have been working. This date was chosen due to facility social workers noting that residents often have visitors (family or community organizations) for Christmas holidays, but few people visit during Thanksgiving. Students were notified of this date on the original syllabus, but if there were scheduling conflicts, students had to problem solve within their group to ensure the absent student has equal opportunity for involvement on another portion of the project. The event has changed time of day due to feedback from students and residents, but normally is held during the hours following breakfast and before lunch. Students encourage families of the residents to attend, if possible. Faculty and facility staff act as participants in the student led group activities.

Lastly, as a collective, the students compose a presentation for the key stakeholders (long-term facility residents and staff, social work faculty and staff, and university administration) using CSWE’s (2015) definition of social work competence which states: “Social work competence is the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being” (p. 6). Students described in detail how the project took place, how success was evaluated (both individually and as a group), and how future classes could possibly build upon this project to continue the rural community partnership and provide sustainable service-learning activities on an ongoing basis. It was during this presentation that students were able to show the correlation between the classroom knowledge and actual practice tasks performed.

Future Directions

It is noted that student feedback was solicited not only for monitoring affective processes throughout the project, but also for programmatic planning. One such finding following the initial implementation was that students, specifically commuter students, wished to conduct their
project in their home communities due to travel expense. At that time, it was negated by the faculty due to possible liability issues and wanting to closely monitor the project in a single setting. By the completion of the first project attempt, students still wanted the option to fulfill the required individual and family hours in a local setting. However, self-reporting in their journals indicated that the reasoning had shifted to wanting to serve their local communities, a more outward focused motivator than saving travel expenses. A letter of introduction and description was devised for students to use in communities outside the initial offering and this model has been used in subsequent cohorts without difficulty. It is anticipated that the student interactions in the various communities will increase the number of the department’s community partnerships.

Practicing in a rural area, especially in a rural long-term care setting, can sometimes create difficulties in obtaining the continuing education required in most states for licensure renewal. Each March, the department sponsors an annual Social Work Day attended by practitioners from throughout the state. Faculty and students decided Social Work Day would be an opportunity for this cohort (and each consecutive cohorts) to not only educate practitioners regarding the project, but a great way for students to add professional contacts to their portfolio, as well as “give back” to the profession/professionals. Students created a poster presentation and corresponding discussion for the event, which took place four months after the actual completion of the project. During the session, students not only listed individual tasks accomplished, but were also able to demonstrate competency of the reasoning underlying the tasks. More importantly, the students did this as a fully cohesive cohort panel. They learned which members were good at which tasks and played to the strengths of the collective. One student even told an audience member that her stereotypical beliefs of working with the elderly changed and working in rural areas could have advantages over working in urban areas.

Conclusions

This assignment began as an experiential way to use infusion methods to teach social work practice with individuals and measure the corresponding competencies. The teaching environment began to change and went from the traditional classroom to hybrid, and at one time even included an online offering. The community served expanded in direct correlation to the change in the teaching environment with one active duty service member completing the practice skills while deployed.

The course has continued to evolve over time. Activities related to families and groups have been added. Practice skills, knowledge and competencies were built upon and measured across multiple classes. The foundation which was initially constructed with the students and accrediting bodies listed as the main stakeholders, expanded to local long-term care facilities, other agencies servicing geriatric consumers, communities, practitioners, the university, and other faculty. Each entity needed something different, but the practice focus for the majority of the project components up to that now has been micro and mezzo. Recently, with the addition of the community-wide continuing education offering and the opportunity for students to interact with additional agencies, there is an increased possibility of a macro component being included at the organizational and/or community level in the near future.
References


