

Using Modified Problem- Based Learning to Teach Social Work Practice Skills

Sabrina Williamson, PhD
Valerie Chang, PhD
Mack Fellows 2006-2007
Carol Decker, PhD
IUSSW
FACET Retreat
May 19, 2007

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of this research project is to determine the efficacy of using modified problem-based learning to enhance the ability of social work students to approach and think about cases in the same way that a professional social worker would

Rationale for the Study

- It is important for social work majors to learn to think like social work professionals
- It is important to increase the transfer of learning that occurs between classroom learning and subsequent field placement experiences
- One potential way to increase the transfer of learning from classroom to field is by the use of educational methods such as problem-based learning

Literature Review: Transfer of learning

- Transfer of learning
 - Defined as a circumstance where prior learning affects new knowledge or performance
 - Limited knowledge concerning successful transfer of learning in social work

(Macaulay & Cree, 1999)

Literature Review: Transfer of learning

- Transfer of learning is optimized when knowledge is acquired
 - Actively
 - Collaboratively
 - Through experience using such methods as problem-based learning

(Boud & Miller, 1996; Macaulay & Cree, 1999)

Literature Review: Thinking like a professional

- Professors often do not teach students how to think like professionals (Middendorf & Pace, 2005)
 - Educators need to identify each step in their thinking process and teach that thinking process to students
- Professionals are able to
 - discern meaning from information
 - organize knowledge around major principles
 - respond to changes in context
 - access and retrieve knowledge smoothly
(Thompson, Licklider & Jungst, 2003)

Literature Review: Problem-based learning (PBL)

- Learning results from working with a group to understand and/or resolve a problem (Savery, 2006)
- PBL instructors guide learners in the development of problem-solving and group process skills and collaborate with learners in the quest for knowledge (Boud & Geletti, 1991)

Modified problem based learning

- With modified problem-based learning (MPBL), instructors identify the questions professional social workers might ask themselves in a similar situation.
- These questions guide the students' exploration and learning.

Research Objectives

- 1) Measure changes in students' abilities to analyze client situations and apply practice knowledge to these situations
- 2) Assess student perceptions of the impact of modified problem-based learning

Methodology

- Sample

- BSW students in the Generalist Social Work Practice course on the Bloomington (n=21) and Indianapolis (n=13) campuses

Methodology

- Data collection
 - Demographic forms
 - Pre-tests and post-tests
 - Surveys of student perceptions of using MPBL

The pre-test/post-test instrument

- Pretest- Beginning case information followed by questions related to
 - Initial assessment information
 - Initial client meeting
- Post-test-Analysis of same case after students used modified PBL

Methodology

- Quantitative Data Analysis
 - Pre-tests and post-tests
 - All of the student responses to the pre and post-tests were grouped into categories and scored on a scale according to appropriateness of answer
 - Scores of the pre-tests and post-tests were compared using t-tests

Methodology

- Qualitative Data Analysis
 - Student responses on the pre-tests and post-tests qualitatively analyzed using content analysis (Stemler, 2001).
 - Content analysis was also used in the assessment of surveys regarding student perceptions of the usefulness of MPBL.

Findings: Quantitative

■ Chi-Square:

- No difference between classes on gender or race.
- Indianapolis class significantly older.

■ T-Test:

- No significant differences on Pre-test between classes
- No significant differences from Pre-test to Post-test for the sample

The survey on student perceptions

- Open-ended questions
 - In what ways do you think using the cases will help you integrate what you are learning into cases?
 - Is there anything about the way we used cases in class that you think should be changed in the future?
 - Overall, what was your experience in using the cases in this class?

Findings on student perceptions

- Perception of self-efficacy
 - *Responding*
 - *Confidence*
- Applicability to practice
 - *Reality*
 - *Group process*
 - *Preparing to practice*

Findings: Qualitative Themes

- Student responses to case questions
 - Initial planning
 - Movement from *inappropriate pre-client planning* to *appropriate pre-client planning*
 - Ongoing assessment
 - Movement from *what the social worker will do* to *what the social worker needs to understand*
 - It's not about being Dr. Phil
 - Movement from a *pop-culture approach* to a *professional practice approach*.

Initial planning

- *What do you think you should accomplish in the first meeting with the client?*
 - In the pre-test a dominant theme was to give the client advice rather than talking about the purpose of the meeting and attempting to understand the client's problems and needs
 - In the post-test a dominant theme was to use the first meeting to identify the purpose of the meeting, to explain roles, to listen, seek clarification, and express understanding

Ongoing assessment

- *What do you think will be important to accomplish in the next two sessions?*
 - In the pre-test, the common response was to move into “fixing” the client’s problems
 - In the post-test, students were more likely to identify the importance of continuing to assess and understand the client’s situation

It's not about being Dr. Phil

- *What do you think will be important to accomplish in the next two sessions?*
 - In the pre-test, students were more likely to articulate that they would tell the client how to feel about her problem
 - In the post-test, student responses were more likely to articulate steps consistent with a professional practice orientation

Limitations

- Small sample size
- MPBL not a “manualized” method
 - A fidelity issue because the actual implementation of MPBL was different across classes
- Measurement difficulties
 - Post hoc development of measurement schemata
 - No measurement of actual outcome (i.e. improvements in field placement)

SOTL: Our lessons learned

- PBL or MPBL needs to be the central focus of a course, not an “add on”
 - Allow time to discuss and process cases in class
 - Structure course assignments to emphasize work with cases
 - Smaller learning groups
 - Students complete individual assignments and then share with learning groups

Conclusion

- Modified problem-based learning in social work practice classes helps students move along the trajectory of thinking like professionals.
- By engaging in work with their peers and actively thinking about “what comes next” with their cases, students have more confidence in their knowledge and skills as they enter their field placements.

References

- Boud, D. & Geletti, G. I. (Eds.) (1991) Introduction. *The challenge of problem based learning* (pp 13-20). New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Boud, D. & Miller, N. (Eds.) (1996). *Working with experience: Animating learning*. London: Routledge

References

- Macaulay, C., & Cree, V.E. (1999). Transfer of learning: Concept and process. *Social Work Education, 18*(2), 183-194.
- Middendorf, J., & Pace, D. (2005). Decoding the disciplines: A model for helping students learn disciplinary ways of thinking. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 98*, 1-12.

References

- Savery, J.R. (2006). Overview of problem-based learning: Definitions and distinctions. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-based Learning*, 1(1), 9-20.
- Stemler, S. (2001). An overview of content analysis. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 7(17). Retrieved January 9, 2007 from <http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=17>

References

- Thompson, J., Licklider, B., & Jungst, S. (2003). Learner-centered teaching: Postsecondary strategies that promote 'Thinking Like A Professional'. *Theory Into Practice*, 42(2), 133-141.