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Pedagogical Techniques that Provide Educational Value to Social Work Students through Bereavement Academics and Empathetic Advancements

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INTRODUCTION

In the social work dictionary, empathy defines as “the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person (Zaleski, 2016).” Although social workers are expected to provide empathetic client services, social work programs have not engaged in understanding student empathy (Zaleski, 2016). College student’s empathy erosion is not only marked by a society struggling to regain its moral direction, for social work students it is an ethical obligation for professional social work practice. There is a lack of information on how students actually learn the skill of empathy yet professors are responsible for improving college student empathy (Zaleski, 2016). Empathy is essential to providing therapeutic and social work services (Zaleski, 2016) and is the most important concept of dialogs (Caprino, 2016). Central to the relationship social workers build with their clients (Zaleski, 2016), empathy needs to be exchanged between the empathizer and receiver, verbally or non-verbally so that it is felt by the receiver (Caprino, 2016).

Social work students overwhelmingly report personal life struggles as the catalyst for choosing the field of social work, resulting in a lack of empathy among these students (Zaleski, 2016). Social work students confirmed that regardless of their experiences, empathy was a continuous learning process accomplished through both classroom learning and professors acting as role models (Zaleski, 2016). Some of the decline in empathy is remarked to be the result of the booming technology that requires face-to-face contact, which is necessary for the human uniqueness of empathy (Caprino, 2016). The professors and assignments are vital tools in advancing a student’s ability to relate to the experiences of others; and in the social work discipline, others will one day become the student’s clientele.

THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Because of the lack of student empathy and roles that professors portray, the concept of “teaching through relationships,” is highly recommended for social work educators (Zaleski, 2016). This progressive technique understands that the professor is familiar with their students and with this information, they are better equipped to educate them (Zaleski, 2016). Social work educators are responsible for being empathetic mirrors for their future social work colleagues (Zaleski, 2016).

Another educational approach that may prove effective for social work students is the student-centered instruction (SCI). According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), social work has its foundation in the person-in-environment framework (CSWE, 2017) and noteworthy is the congruous emphasis that is immediately apparent in SCI, person-in-environment and SCI are both oriented around the properties of an individual. The person-in-environment is a principle that shows the importance of understanding the person and their behavior with consideration for their living space (Kondrat, 2013). The approach of SCI replaces traditional lecturing with the use of active learning; this means students are more responsible for information that would have been spoon-fed to them in a traditional class (Felder & Brent, 1996). With SCI, *open-ended problems* that need creative solutions from *critical thinking* because no explicit text example is suitable; and an original *writing exercise*, which is assigned using cooperative team learning (Felder & Brent, 1996). This a noteworthy learning technique for social work because of the student initiated engagement required, the critical thinking, and the writing; which constitute the SCI. Social work education requires the aforementioned teaching through relationships techniques as well as the traditional teaching/lecturing methods

and comprehensive compositions that are utilized in SCI (Grise-Owens, Cambron, & Valade, 2010).

Just as Grise-Owen, et al. (2010) suggests, the bereavement assignment aligns with course learning objectives, is articulated often, and to make learning engagement student-owned, it is created using SCI and the benefits of cooperative group learning. Felder and Brent (1996) and Grise-Owen, et al. (2010) both encourage cooperative learning among student groups.

Cooperative small group learning based on theoretical framework; mimics the same type of concepts taught in the techniques of counseling course, social work 326. The course exposes students to various psychodynamic theories and applications. Cooperative group learning is based on the sociocultural theory of development; this theory indicates students learn by solving problems that take them beyond their current level, with support from their professor and peers (Brame & Biel, 2017). Johnson, et al. (2006) reports that college student cooperative learning results in better academic achievement verses individual learning (as cited in Brame & Biel, 2017). Incorporated in the assignment are some considerations encouraged by Grise-Owens, et al. (2010) from the reflections of Roche, et. al (1999); encourage *shared student learning* while remaining available as an instructor, develop a chance for students to *learn through talking and reflection*, and *erase the line of division between theory and action and make it one application* (as cited in Grise-Owens, Cambron, & Valade, 2010).

GRIEF

A former social work college student, Austin Bullock, writes an application of the five stages of grief for college students (Bullock, 2016). He makes a casual note about students actually being in college verses participating in college (Bullock, 2016) and many professors would immediately understand this separation. The simplistic discussion by Bullock provides a comparison for college students and shows their everyday life and experiences, related to the stages of grief. They may not be aware of the grief association but they are fully aware that the collegiate lifestyle is no longer relaxed and non-committed as high school once was (Bullock, 2016). He applies *denial* to the recognition of the real world; *anger* to the failing grade; *bargaining* to the quickly acquired skill of begging the professor for extra credit; *depression* to the overwhelming amount of extra credit, make-up work, and current projects; and *acceptance* to accepting the realization of this new and difficult experience (Bullock, 2016).

The widely accepted number of grieving first year college students is said to be growing (Balk, 2008). Between 22 and 30 percent of college, freshmen will experience the death of a family member (Balk, 2008). A Kansas State University study reports that if the period is extended to twenty-four months, the number of students dealing with family deaths is 49 percent (Balk, 2008). In this same longitudinal study of almost 1,000 students, eighty-one percent indicated that a family member's death had occurred; the time frame was within four years (Balk, 2008). According to Wrenn (1991), 5,000 to 18,750 United States college students die annually (Balk, 2008). Grief is difficult for eighteen to twenty-three year olds with additional complications for students with additional obstacles (as cited in Balk, 2008).

Most often college students do not seek professional assistance in response to the loss of a loved one, which leaves them experiencing repercussions such as insomnia, disorganization, emotional outbursts, concentration problems, and spiritual discontent (Balk, 2008).

Barnett, et al. discusses the scholastic report and suggests that empathy without education is not an effective way to create the appropriate bereavement response to those who have lost loved ones (as cited in Fajgenbaum, 2007).

THE EDUCATORS APPROACH

The SWK 326 course introduces BSW students to techniques in counseling by developing their knowledge of various theories, competences with theoretical interventions, and skills using integrative techniques with diverse populations (Williamson-Ashe, 2014). The course also enhances student growth through self-reflection, professional authenticity, and ethical integrity in the social work profession (Williamson-Ashe, 2014).

The course meets several of the CSWE EPAS (educational policy and accreditation standards) core competencies and practice behaviors; specifically these identify the bereavement assignment. Professional Identity 2.1.1 – practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional roles and boundaries; Ethical Practice 2.1.2 – recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice; Critical Thinking 2.1.3 – distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom; Research Based Practice 2.1.6 – use research evidence to inform practice; Human Behavior 2.1.7 – utilize conceptual frameworks to guide the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation; Engage, Assess, Intervene, Evaluate 2.1.10 – identifying, analyzing, and implementing evidence-based intervention designed to achieve client goals (CSWE, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

In the bereavement assignment student, learning develops through engagement and benefits the student in multiple areas. Engagement for learning activities consists of time, faculty, and peer interactions; critical thinking, problem solving, and communication are the collegiate outcomes for engagement (Kinzie, McCormick, & Gonyea, 2016). Addressing the real life application in combination with cooperative small group learning was a challenge. To best approach student sentiments, a questionnaire designed for collaboration and teamwork adjusted to address the theoretical perspective, academic assignment, and included open-ended questions.

In the April 2017, a junior social work student succumbed to an untimely accidental death while actively engaging in a community service project. Hearing of the tragedy, videos and media news clips of the students' death along with bereavement research and the deceased students' University affiliation, was shared with students enrolled in social work 326, techniques of counseling course.

Social work students, presented with instruction to complete the bereavement assignment, used the learned psychoanalytical approaches in Gerald Corey's (2015) *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy 10th edition* as their conceptual framework. This assignment was not specified on the syllabus, but was noted as an instructor's choice assignment; allowing for the professor to have flexibility in directing the students near the completion of the semester, that would best enhance and support the learning objectives and improve student's understanding of course related materials. This bereavement assignment also served as a current event, noted earlier by Grise-Owens, et al. (2010) to promote more curricula engagement and result in a greater understanding and application of learned materials.

Course students were informed to use their social work skills and knowledge to address the deceased student social work classmates and consider what they may be experiencing as a social work student that suffered the loss of a fellow classmate. Students were to convey this in a scholastic research format using their assigned psychoanalytical approach as the framework for addressing student bereavement. No formal assignment structure was provided, only a length limitation of 3 typed pages. The limitations were in consideration of delivering one bundled document to the deceased student's academic University department to aid students in a therapeutic constructive manor for dealing with the loss of their peer. Students were given a 3-week completion time-frame with weekly professorial facilitations in open class reviews of student research and writings; professors are responsible for improving college student empathy (Zaleski, 2016) this encouraged *shared student learning while remaining available as an instructor* which is one of the considerations from Grise-Owens, et al. (2010). Classroom discussions also included "the empty chair." In this case, the empty chair does not reference Gestalt's therapeutic technique where the client imagines a vital person in the empty chair and roles are reverse leaving the client to speak in the voice of the absent person (Knittel, 2010). Instead this empty chair reference encouraged students to recognize the empty chair next to them as the recently deceased student (Empty Chair Syndrome, 2017). Because the empty chair represents bereavement, the self-coined term, sorrowful is used in conjunction with empty chair.

During the class reviews, students worked in cooperative small group learning, which is encouraged by Felder & Brent (1996) and Grise-Owens, et al. (2010), to receive and provide peer feedback, this permitted a chance for *students to learn through talking and reflection*, the second consideration from Grise-Owens, et al. (2010). Students instructed to reflect and envision the deceased student as a classmate social work student, not just a part of the greater social work

collegiate student body. *Erasing the line of division between theory and action and creating one application*, which is the third consideration of Grise-Owens, et al. (2010), students used their social work skills and knowledge to address the deceased student's social work classmates and consider what they may be experiencing as a student that suffered the loss of a fellow classmate.

At the conclusion of the semester, a questionnaire provided to students in SWK 326 for voluntary completion, twelve out of fifteen students completed the questionnaire. The amended questionnaire originally determined content knowledge for collaboration and teamwork. It contained 11 (eleven) Likert scale questions and 3 (three) open-ended questions were added.

RESULTS

Respondents overwhelmingly displayed agreement with most of the Likert scale responses. The most highly agreed upon and unanimous responses were reflective of the necessity of critical thinking skills in completing the assignment and the improved ability to articulate the theory better resulted from the assignment, questions three (3) and five (5) respectively. Just beneath the unanimous agreements with eleven (11) students in agreement are questions one (1) and six (6); students agree that the real life application of the theory improved their understanding of the theory and having the specific trauma guide research and theory application resulted in an improved level for understanding the theory. With ten (10) students each in agreement per question, questions two (2), eight (8), and eleven (11) are the third responses ranking in agreement order. Respectively, the assignment added to their ability to research areas, knowing that other social work students and professors could read their research made a difference in how the assignment was completed, and there was value in knowing the learned theories. The

response that ranked fourth in agreement order was question seven (7), where nine (9) students indicated that because the research was related to an actual person, there was improvement to their dedication of good work.

Questions four (4), nine (9), and ten (10) had seven and fewer agreed upon responses, as well as four (4) each neutral responses. These responses make it difficult to assess the student's attitude toward the following areas; did the assignment improve their scholastic writing skills, did knowing that classmates would examine their writing impact their writing, and is this type of classmate collaboration with a theory course encouraged, questions 4, 9, and 10 respectively.

Respondents were asked 3 open-ended questions. The first of those questions ask for a description of what it feels like to contribute to the learning of other students in the wake of a traumatic event, the most utilized singular term was "empowering." Other statements included, "uncomfortable, helpful, it's important to come together to show support, feels positive, enjoyed the real world application, seemed unreal as if students may not receive this, and emotional."

The next question asks for a description of the process and emotions required as students explored the empty chair. During classroom discussions, instructions were for students to reflect on the loss of the student as if the deceased student enrolled in this course and the empty seat adjacent to them was the deceased assigned space, the chair represented loss and sorrow (Empty Chair Syndrome, 2017). Multiple students reported that this exploration helped them to examine the purpose and meaning of their existence, it allowed for a real life application opportunity to use skills, it provided more clarity and brought the situation to the present; one student exclaimed there was no affect.

The final question asks students to elaborate on difficulties, uncertainties, and areas of learning experience. The responses included, the class was a challenge, lack of certainty that this

information would actually help other students, no personal knowledge of the students' University was difficult so responding to this area was falsified, as time progressed understanding areas in the assignment improved, and specifics about what should be incorporated in the paper was needed.

IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

“The purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being” (CSWE, 2015). In order to best provide this level of service, social workers require the irreplaceable skill of empathy. This skill is advanced and practiced as undergraduate students prepare to receive their BSW degree.

The aim of this study was to examine social work student responses to a bereavement assignment where student centered instruction (SCI), teaching through relationships, the inclusion of the “sorrowful empty chair” and cooperative small group learning are utilized techniques. Both SCI and cooperative groups learning advocate problem solving for student educational advancement. Critical thinking and writing composition are also vital elements in SCI, the current event prompts the critical thinking for problem solving and promote the type of student-initiated learning necessary in SCI as well as improves student understanding and application of course learned materials. Combining SCI and cooperative group learning provided students with the greatest advantage of curricula engagement and learning.

To expand and cultivate student empathy, teaching through relationships, and the “sorrowful empty chair,” is connected with the techniques of SCI and cooperative group learning. Teaching through relationships requires faculty familiarity with students, therefore the professor mirrors and mentors' empathetic competencies and applies the “sorrowful empty chair” as a contemplative component. The timeliness of the conclusion of the semester, versus the beginning or middle, permits the professor to become acquainted with the enrolled course

students, and this knowledge of the individual student is a key element in teaching through relationships. As noted in the literature, a professor's familiarity with students creates the relational path for teaching and social work student empathy is enhanced by social work professors. This education and mirroring has not been widely explored.

The results of the bereavement study indicate that the application of theoretical framework to real life events requires critical thinking skills, it improves student theoretical understanding, and students articulate the theory better post application. Results also reveal that the use of current events to guide research improves student research skills, student's theoretical understanding, and student's commitment to produce good work.

With these results, professors should intentionally utilize current events to guide research for subject areas and expect an improvement in student research skills; this could apply to courses outside of social work as well. Professors might also utilize current event assignments to improve their student's dedication to producing good academic results.

To address the scholarly indications that college students have a lack of empathy, social work professors can intentionally create lessons using the "sorrowful empty chair" as reflection. Levine (2013) indicates the choice to feel empathy begins from within but must be nurtured externally and there must be intentionality to create conditions for empathy development in the classroom (Levin, 2013). The common tone in the results indicate that students were reflecting on the meaning of their life and exploring the existence and purpose of their life. The relationship between the empty chair exercises and empathetic feelings is revealed in the reflective thoughts. Being empathetic allows individuals to be in sync with the life around them, it evokes a consciousness and awareness (Florence, 2016), students noted awareness as they questioned their lives. Notably the empathetic process requires a relationship with one's self in

order that there is an awareness of others and a connection with others, “the adult meeting of the mind with emotion” (Florence, 2016). Clearly social work students are operating with empathy that presumptuously is enhanced through the “sorrowful empty chair” reflective thoughts.

These reflective thoughts social work students were describing and engaging in may be defined by the Brookfield model, a model of reflection developed in 2005. This reflective model is built on understanding a situation from four different perspectives; from the “lenses” of a self-view, a student view, a peers view, and theoretical literature and research view (Brookfield, 2005). The outcome of this analysis will lead to personal development as a result of deep reflection and is an appropriate model when there is self-motivation for learning (Brookfield, 2005). The “lenses” of the Brookfield model are echoed in the bereavement assignment. In the assignment, students are individually reflecting on the deceased as a classmate and writing information based on what they feel they would need, this is both autobiographical and a student’s view. The peer view initiated in the cooperative group learning as students provided feedback to one another. Moreover, the final view of research connected to the bereavement assignment through the empirical research, students engaged to expand their theoretical perspectives, application, and bereavement knowledge.

From the results of a pilot study of service-learning college students, five (5) areas increase student empathy when incorporated into service-learning classes. They include “give students experiential opportunities to build empathy, incorporate empathy into students’ reflections, teach the empathy toolbox, assess and reimagine classroom culture and design, and add empathy to the learning objectives and graded coursework” (Everhart, et al., 2016). In the bereavement assignment, all five areas were included although the course is not service learning but utilizes application of knowledge.

The goal of the five areas in Everhart, et al. (2016) that will increase empathy is to include one or more of the areas to compliment service and community engagement (Everhart, et al., 2016). Shushok (2015) states that student empathetic competence can be strengthened [through professorial engagement] to repair the documented 34% of empathy erosion among students since 1980 (Shushok, 2015). The bereavement assignment responds to the first of the five areas because the assignment is experiential with exploratory methods and empirical research although it utilized theoretical application, it was a practical method to build empathy. The second area placing empathy in student reflections' completed through the "sorrowful empty chair." In the third area, the bereavement study integrated parts of the empathy toolbox during cooperative group learning by using active listening, respect, empathic communication and cultural competency. This was initiated in the bereavement assignment when students researched the deceased social work student's religious and academic environment for cultural proficiency. The fourth area of the classroom reimagines the culture through the non-traditional approaches of SCI and teaching through relationships. The fifth and final area, empathy was added to graded coursework through the multiple tiers of the bereavement assignment.

Because there is congruence between the tasks of the bereavement assignment and the 5 noted areas above, there is a clear indication of support for Levine's (2013) report of intentionality when introducing empathy in the classroom. Intentionally introducing the "sorrowful empty chair" in the bereavement assignment led to reflective thoughts that are equal to empathy and shows the Brookfield model of reflection in production.

LIMITATIONS

During the bereavement assignment, the professor mentored and mirrored behaviors; without using the term empathy as a goal. The bereavement assignment had no hindrance and influence by the subconscious thoughts of an assessment questionnaire. Students were unaware during the bereavement assignment that there would be a survey and the professor did not engage the bereavement process with an analysis planned. Therefore, the information resulting from the assignment is without contamination so empathy may not have been an associated thought for students when they completed the questionnaire.

The questionnaire did not specifically ask students about their levels of empathy before or after the bereavement assignment. This is either negligent or an opportunity to substantiate student's reflective thoughts as genuine empathy, the latter position is highlighted in research and authenticates this research.

This course enrolled both junior and senior level students, which alters their course exposures at the time of the bereavement assignment and could alter their perceptions of the assignment. The differing classifications could also indicate that some students' exposure to social work practice through their social work practicum placements and others may not have experienced social work applications at this point.

As mentioned by one of the student's comments, there was a lack of specific directions provided for the writing assignment. This could have imposed some uncertainties and caution for students, hindering their work and producing a reserved product.

CONCLUSION

Social work students confirmed that empathy was a continuous learning process accomplished through classroom learning and professors acting as role models (Zaleski, 2016). In the bereavement assignment the highly recommended, teaching through relationships technique, utilizes the “sorrowful empty chair,” reflections as the professor mentors empathy with students. In response, students’ personal awareness of their lives resonated as empathy. After the survey results were analyzed the five areas in Everhart, et al. (2016) that increase empathy, were compared to the bereavement assignment process. This resulted in affirmation that the methods utilized in the bereavement assignment aligned with empathy improvement.

The results of the bereavement study not only show that the “sorrowful empty chair” enhanced college student empathy but also that the application of theoretical framework to real life events requires critical thinking skills and improves student theoretical understanding and articulation. With the intentional use of current events, students proved that their research skills and theoretical understanding advances and they have an improved commitment to produce good work.

Along with the “sorrowful empty chair” technique in the bereavement assignment, the teaching techniques of SCI, cooperative small group learning, and teaching through relationships, produced the aforementioned results.

Social work students often enter the field because of personal life obstacles. As a social work student, education is complicated by the difficulty grief imposes for eighteen to twenty-three year olds and the empathy college students lack. This research is important for higher education and social work because five thousand to 18,750 college students die annually (as cited in Balk, 2008) and from the discipline of social work, others will one day become the student’s clientele.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Content Knowledge
Collaboration & Teamwork
Technology & Communication

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