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Using Experiential Exercises to Teach about Diversity, Oppression, and Social Justice

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Experiential exercises can be effectively incorporated into social work courses that focus on diversity, oppression, and social justice. This article describes three models of experiential activities, provides examples of exercises within the three models and empirical support for their effectiveness, and identifies criticisms surrounding their use in the classroom. The final section of the article offers general guidelines to instructors to prepare for experiential exercises, to implement them in the classroom, and to evaluate their impact on students.

KEYWORDS diversity, social justice, oppression, experiential learning, experiential exercises

OVERVIEW OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODELS

Experiential exercises are used in various fields with different purposes, such as creativity training in business education (Gundry & Kickul, 1996); teaching literature (Knapp, 1996); and outdoor leadership training in the...
adventure field (Warren, 2002). In social work education, they are widely used to enhance students’ learning on issues related to social justice and human diversity. The use of experiential exercises bridges the gap between the academic settings and the field (Land, 1987; Nagda et al., 1999). Active forms of learning provide an opportunity for students to deepen their knowledge, develop practice skills, and prepare to work effectively with clients of diverse social and cultural backgrounds (Langer, 1995).

There are a variety of experiential exercises used in social work curricula, such as role plays, case studies, group activities, and field work. These experiential exercises can be broadly categorized into three models: experiencing, self-discovering, and learning. Exercises that are categorized as experiencing include those that provide students with an opportunity to actually take on a disadvantaged or discriminated role and experience life from the viewpoint of an oppressed population. Such exercises help students be sensitized to the needs and experiences of diverse clients. For example, using a wheelchair or being fed by others may facilitate their understanding of the experience of clients with physical disabilities (Land, 1987). In a study conducted by Schuldberg (2005), students used simulation kits to replicate visual impairments common with the aging process.

The second model, self-discovering, includes experiential exercises that assist students in identifying their own cultural identities and biases toward people from different cultures. An example of this type of experiential exercise is Lum’s self-assessment for students (2003) entitled Family Cultural Life Experiences and Contacts Outside One’s Own Cultural/Ethnic Group. Self-reflective activities individually and in groups encourage students to see themselves as cultural beings and learn to be more sensitive to people with different cultural experiences.

The third model, learning, refers to exercises that deepen students’ knowledge of life experiences of diverse populations. Activities include watching and discussing videotapes about a group, engaging in a field trip to a museum, case discussion, reading of poetry by members of the group, or creating products that reflect the culture of the group. For example, the authors have taken class trips to the Virginia Holocaust Museum and the Black History Museum and Cultural Center as part of a course on social work and social justice.

In the rest of this article, we will highlight exercises that can be categorized into one of the three models, including empirical support for their effectiveness and critiques of their usage. Following this, we provide guidelines for use of experiential exercises in courses on diversity, oppression, and social justice.

Experiencing Model

In this type of model, students deepen their understanding of social issues at both emotional and cognitive levels through engaging in the process of the
exercise itself (Rabow, Stein, & Conley, 1999). Common exercises include role plays and game play that put students in their clients’ shoes. Students gain new insights into the world from the clients’ perspectives and then reflect upon their own thoughts, feelings, and reactions (Garcia & Melendez, 1997; Land, 1987).

Fineran, Bolen, Urban-Keary, and Zimmerman (2002) used an experiential game entitled Community Build to enhance social work students’ learning of oppression. Students were assembled into four groups, which represented an affluent community, a middle-class community, and two lower socioeconomic communities. Each group physically built its own ideal community by using unequally distributed resources and supplies. Because of a lack of resources, groups of lower socioeconomic status were able to build few buildings in their communities, while other socioeconomically advantaged groups established modest or even abundant communities. Through this simulation, students experienced and observed oppression and social injustice such as differential policies and practices that affect low-, middle-, and high-income communities. The findings of the quantitative evaluation indicated that, compared to non-participating students, those who participated in Community Build felt more individual responsibility for institutional discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, class bias, ethnocentrism, poverty), perceived having more power to change institutional discrimination, and developed greater awareness of how a person’s community of origin influences his or her life chances and goals.

In a study conducted by Rabow and colleagues (1999), social psychology students were asked to wear a pink triangle pin symbolizing support for gay rights for 2 days. First, all students participated in a total of four class discussions to decide whether they would participate in the experiment. The discussions gave students an opportunity to confront and share their own fears, prejudices, and homophobia. Those who decided to wear the pin were able to gain a greater understanding of members of sexual minorities by experiencing the negative reactions from family, friends, and strangers. Students reported a greater appreciation for heterosexual privilege, an increased awareness of their own approval of (or participation in) antigay oppression, and permanent attitudinal and behavioral changes as a result of going through the activity.

Tromski and Doston (2003) reported the effectiveness of interactive drama dealing with the issues of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism in increasing cross-cultural awareness and understanding. Counseling students were given an opportunity to experience a different world view by playing a character who lives as a minority in her or his culture. Actors and audiences both were able to empathize with the characters’ feelings and become aware of their own feelings and reactions to the different scenes.

The first author of this article has used an experiential exercise in a social justice course entitled “Lifeline.” The objectives of this exercise include
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sensitizing students to what life is like for an oppressed group with which they do not personally identify, experiencing how privilege and oppression operate in everyday situations, and observing the coping strategies that oppressed groups utilize when they experience discrimination. In this exercise, several students are selected to stay in the classroom before the class begins while the remaining students are instructed to wait in the hallway until they are called in. The students who stay in the classroom become the workers in three stations (bank, jobs, housing), a sheriff, an escort, a complaints desk attendant, the nametag distributor, and the distributor of the finish letters. The workers are given written instructions with suggestions of what they could say to a participant, depending on his or her name tag, and they are instructed to remain in role and to refrain from informing the participants about the meaning of the letters and colors on the name tags. The name tag distributor (usually the instructor) calls the students into the classroom one at a time. Each student is given a name tag with three letters (symbolizing socioeconomic class, race/ethnicity, and gender), and some of the name tags have a brown, yellow, or red line, which indicates to the worker whether the participant is a Muslim, lesbian/gay man, or person using a wheelchair. The name tag given to a student should provide for a different experience and identity than he or she usually has in life. A White, male, heterosexual student, for example, may receive a name tag that indicates a “Black, female, lesbian.” Participants do not know what their name tags mean or the reasons why they are being treated as they are throughout the game.

The two White male and female upper-income participants are escorted to the front of each station, regardless of who is waiting, often getting a mansion, high-status jobs, and vacation homes, and then they are seated in a VIP section, away from the other participants. Those who end up in “jail” are often low-income persons of color, persons with disabilities, or those who are lesbian or gay. They may or may not make it out of jail before the exercise ends. There may be one or two low-income people who fail to get past the first station (bank) because they do not understand the gibberish application form that was given to them to get money, which they need for the jobs and housing stations. Other low-income participants look over at the application the middle-income participants receive and try to answer their forms based on what they can see. Those without privilege, who attempt to file a complaint at the complaint desk, may witness the worker crush the complaint form and pretend to throw it away. A couple of lesbian or gay participants may be seated far away from other participants, and a worker at a station may pretend to spray Lysol on their seat when they vacate it. They may have also been told that they are not suitable for a job that would involve teaching children. Asian and Hispanic men and women may be asked very slowly and condescendingly if they “speak English.” Participants using a wheelchair are told by the name tag distributor that they
are not to attempt to go anywhere without the escort’s assistance, and the workers speak to them very slowly and in a loud voice as if their need to use an assistive device means that they also are deaf or cognitively disabled.\footnote{For complete instructions to Lifeline, please contact the first author. For a list of simulation games to promote intercultural awareness, see Appendix A in Kohls & Knight, 1994.} Although Lifeline has not been empirically evaluated, a similar simulation conducted during a student orientation has been positively evaluated by students and participants who have noted that the simulation has helped them to become more empathic toward clients and to realize the depth and complexity of the social justice issues faced by client populations.

Experiential exercises such as these also have been critiqued for their potential to create psychological distress in students. For example, the pink triangle exercise can put students in a position to be confronted by anti-gay harassment, which could potentially compromise their psychological and physical safety. Additionally, in our own classes, we have noticed that occasionally a student will object to being put into a role with which he or she may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. For students who have experienced much privilege in their lives, the short-lived experience of not having privilege can be unsettling. In the authors’ experience, it may be helpful to think through whether a particular exercise needs additional preparation of students before they engage as a way to prepare them for various feelings that arise through participation. Conversely, for exercises such as Lifeline, the instructor would purposely omit preparing students ahead of time. The purpose of this is to present an environment where authentic emotions may emerge. Regardless of the choice whether to prepare students, attention must be given to the subsequent processing component after conducting any of these experiential exercises.

Self-discovering Model

The self-discovering model is widely used in cross-cultural learning, particularly in order to increase students’ awareness of their own beliefs and attitudes toward other cultural groups. Through activities such as group discussions and case studies, students reflect upon and become more sensitive to their cultural values, biases, thoughts, and feelings. Nakanishi and Rittner (1992) introduced the \textit{Inclusionary Cultural Model}, which includes didactic and experiential components for social work students. The model involves within (same cultural identity) and intergroup (across cultural identities) discussions. First, in culturally similar groups, students discuss what they were taught as children about their culture, the world, and acceptable standards of behavior. Then, they share the within-group experiences with other cultural groups and identify similarities and differences among the groups. The model offers an opportunity for students to learn how their values and
norms have been shaped by their own cultural experiences. It also encourages them to identify how these personal values and experiences affect their interpretation of behaviors of other cultural groups.

Nagda et al. (1999) and Merchant and Haslett (2000) developed similar cultural competence exercises for social work students. In a study conducted by Nagda et al., students engaged in intergroup dialogues, which were peer-facilitated face-to-face meetings of a small group of participants from different racial and ethnic identities. Students shared their own racially based experiences and discussed specific issues such as interracial dating and affirmative action. Intergroup dialogue increased students’ awareness of their own and others’ experiences as racial/ethnic beings. Students also developed a greater commitment to social justice. Merchant and Haslett used variations of a collaborative group model with social work students in two different programs. In one program, they used task groups to teach about multicultural life span (“Raising the Ethnic Child”) in a human behavior course. In another program, they gave a group-work assignment to students in a practice course. In both programs, students experienced group structure and dynamics while they attended to cultural issues. Feedback from students and faculty members suggested that these group exercises were helpful to enhance students’ understanding of their own culturally-influenced behavior and the importance of cultural competence in providing social work services.

Latting (1990) used *Identifying the Isms*, which is a teaching model for raising awareness of cultural biases and preparing social work students for culturally sensitive practice. Students first discussed the definition and functions of bias and reflected on their own biases. Then, they analyzed a series of vignettes and identified whether bias existed in the situations described. The vignette exercise enabled students to further clarify their own and their classmates’ perceptions and biases. Feedback from students showed that the model helped them critically examine their own biases with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status and raise their awareness of human rights issues.

The self-discovering model has been used in other areas of practice in order to address faulty beliefs and biased attitudes that foster stigma. Lay and McGuire (2008) implemented a structured reflection exercise in a graduate social work addictions practice course. The exercise included three sections. First, students wrote a descriptive analysis of their own experience related to addiction and gave their analysis a title to externalize it. Second, they answered a series of specific deconstruction questions by inserting the given title of their externalized narrative. Finally, they articulated their learning from the exercise by describing how it might affect their practice. Evaluations of papers submitted by students indicated that the exercise offered them an opportunity to objectively examine their personal and professional experiences with addiction. Students were able to
better recognize how these experiences influenced their personal biases, stereotypes, and the stigmatization of individuals and families struggling with addiction.

Self-awareness is emphasized in social work education, given that most social work students will be working directly with clients. Transference and counter-transference are important issues that may adversely affect clients and need to be addressed as a part of social work education. Therefore, exercises involving self-discovery and self-awareness can serve as one of the venues to address these issues. One exercise that the third author designed aims at asking the students to identify a few of their biases, trace the origin of these biases, find scholarly evidence that affirms and/or disproves these biases, tie each bias to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics and, finally, suggest ways to overcome these biases. The purpose of this exercise is to engage the students in a critical examination of their conscience or unconscious ways of being. Put differently, this exercise challenges the values and ways of everyday thinking that have been shaped by societal norms. Further, it engages the students in critical thinking by questioning the status quo. Additionally, focusing on the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics helps students engage in the overarching themes of the social work profession: social and economic justice. Finally, social work is about creating change, and it is incumbent for students to begin the journey not only of self-discovery but of discovering ways of improving their personal and professional selves; hence, the exercise asks students to come up with strategies to overcome their own biases.

The exercise described above is also a graded assignment in a social justice course. In review of the student papers, the instructor has been able to get a sense of the impact of this self-awareness exercise on the students, particularly the impact from visiting the “emotional neighborhood” inside themselves that they may not have visited before. Additionally, students are expected to be able to convey these insights onto papers. This narrative or diary format enables even further reflection and growth.

The foregoing examples of self-discovering exercises have been criticized along a few dimensions. Intragroup and intergroup dialogue may remain at a superficial level, depending on the level of risk the students are willing to take and the perceived safety of the classroom for honest exploration of these issues, without the fear of retribution. Instructors will need to create a trusting, safe, and authentic classroom climate prior to introducing exercises of this nature (Miller & Garran, 2008). Social work students may learn early on in their program that it may be unwise to verbalize experiences or beliefs that may be perceived as contrary to the liberal values of the profession. Therefore, sometimes encouragement to disclose one’s biases may be viewed as too risky, and students will go “underground” with their beliefs.
Learning Model

In the learning model, students mainly play the role of observers or learners. Through participation in activities outside the classroom, they gain knowledge and deepen their understanding of cultural and human diversity and various social issues. In a study by Haulotte and McNeil (1998), social work students increased awareness about issues of aging, especially around ageism, as well as myths and stereotypes about older adults, through visiting long-term care facilities and interviewing residents. Cheek, Rector, and Davis (2007) reported experiences of female MSW students who participated in the Clothesline Project, a program for survivors of domestic violence. Students attended meetings and events held in domestic violence programs and interacted with the women and staff. Findings from focus group interviews indicate that the project helped students understand the dynamics of domestic violence and enhanced their knowledge about this population. In addition, students were able to learn about issues associated with group dynamics by observing the role of the staff and their leadership styles.

International experiential learning increasingly is becoming popular for providing students with an opportunity for on-site exposure to different cultures and social systems. Jakubowski (2003) took her students to Cuba for an international service-learning project to learn about political diversity, community development, and social justice. Students interacted with local people and visited schools and classrooms. Through these experiences, they gained a new understanding and critical insight into the concepts of difference, privilege, development, and justice beyond what they had previously learned in their classroom. Similarly, in a study by Gilin and Young (2009), a 10-day study trip to Italy facilitated cultural awareness and sensitivity among MSW social work students. By visiting local service agencies, students were able to observe and experience different styles of social work practice and other ways of knowing and doing that could be applied in the United States. Being in a foreign country and experiencing struggles to be understood by Italians also resulted in more empathic attitudes toward their non-English-speaking clients. Furthermore, Fairchild, Pillai, and Noble (2006) reported the effectiveness of a 2-week program for MSW students in Australia. The program involved attending seminars and conducting field visits to local social service agencies and council meetings. Findings from pre- and posttests indicated positive changes in students’ attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge of multiculturalism.

In some studies, students were more actively engaged in experiential learning. In a study by Flynn (1997), Australian social work students created a radio program in response to a learning unit on the criminal justice system. The program explored the links between the law and inequality
and educated listeners about how the current legal system reflected and maintained dominant social and economic interests in society. This project helped students experientially study the inequalities inherent in the criminal justice system. It also raised awareness of their responsibility to act to create change in society.

Carey (2007) described a class project for teaching an undergraduate social work macro-practice course. Students played the role of grassroots leaders and investigated campus-wide implementation of federal legislation regarding sexual assault prevention training for college students. They participated in task-oriented groups that involved a literature search of the social problem, legislative exploration of the relevant social policies, investigation of legislative implementation, and preparation of a final presentation. The president of the university attended this presentation and agreed to follow the changes recommended by the students. At the post-presentation evaluation meeting, students reported a sense of empowerment as they conceptualized and implemented macro-practice to advocate for change in policy. The project gave students the opportunity to see the connections among a social problem, social policy, action research, and social change and gain a new respect for the significance of macro-practice.

There are often concerns, however, with the use of exercises in the learning model. Local and international field trips can sometimes have a circus-like quality in that students are coming to watch/observe the locals/foreigners perform for them but not to spend time being genuinely engaged with those communities. The first author in one class had a Jewish student who asked to be excused from a field trip to the state’s Holocaust Museum because in principle she believed that the idea of a museum that collected artifacts of such devastating experiences seemed an absurdity to her. Furthermore, instructors need to be cautious about exercises that tend to promote stereotypes about an oppressed population or that focus exclusively on the population’s deficits. Rather, the exercises should always endeavor to promote both a strengths and a resilience perspective (Edwards, 2006; Hunter & Hickerson, 2003).

When considering the use of experiential exercises, social work instructors need to weigh the potential positive and negative consequences. Instructors should be very deliberate in their decision making concerning whether to use exercises, which ones to use, the adaptations required for their use with a particular class, and the plan for processing the activities. Additionally, although we provided empirical support for several of the exercises noted above, the evaluation of experiential exercises in general has been found to be lacking rigor with regard to research design and measurement (Gosen & Washbush, 2004).
Guidelines for Use of Experiential Exercises

We believe that when using experiential exercises, these general guidelines can maximize their benefits in the course of preparing exercises:

- Obtain administrative support of the academic program or school or in order to receive sufficient resources. Set aside sufficient time to be able to work on the various tasks necessary in planning and implementing the exercises (Nagda et al., 1999). Regarding the simulation during the MSW student orientation, briefly mentioned above, this exercise requires a large number of social services employees and faculty members to participate in running the activity. Sometimes obtaining the necessary numbers may prove difficult.
- Consider the timing, the class content, learning needs, and maturity of the students and carefully judge appropriateness of the exercises and student readiness (Latting, 1990). Many of the exercises that the authors have described would apply to both BSW and MSW students. The exercises, however, may need to be adjusted to match the developmental and professional differences between undergraduate and graduate students.
- Consider students’ own prior personal experiences, and be aware of the emotional impact of experiential learning projects, especially when dealing with sensitive issues such as domestic violence. If appropriate, advise students of the potentially emotionally provocative nature of the project (Cheek et al., 2007). Instructors may want to consider whether to tell students that they can “opt out” of an activity or whether the instructor will handle this when raised by the student on a case-by-case basis (as was the case of the student who requested to be exempted from attending the field trip to the Holocaust Museum).

When students actually engage in exercises,

- provide clear and detailed task assignments so that students will not feel overwhelmed (Carey, 2007);
- establish a norm of acceptance and openness in the classroom to encourage students to express themselves freely; maintain a nonjudgmental attitude, and respond positively to all student efforts to participate (Garside & Edwards, 1996; Latting, 1990); consider the use of selective instructor self-disclosure to model authenticity and willingness to risk, especially when requesting the students to do so;
- encourage and model teamwork at individual, task group, and class levels (Carey, 2007); and
- leave sufficient time at the end of the sessions for debriefing of the learning activities and for integration of them with the academic content (Land, 1987; Nagda, et al., 1999); let students report and reflect on their feelings and findings (Garside & Edwards, 1996).
The Lifeline exercise takes about 45 minutes of actual activity and 15 to 20 minutes of processing time afterward. It is important to build in adequate time for processing rather than allowing an activity to go right up until class ends—and then students are sent off without having an outlet to process their feelings.

In order to improve exercises,

- obtain written and verbal comments, and give students both formal and informal feedback (Flynn, 1997; we have found that course journals can be helpful formats for student feedback about experiential activities);
- conduct a quantitative evaluation of the exercises to objectively examine their effectiveness; in addition, longitudinal studies are useful for evaluating long-term outcomes (Haulotte & McNeil, 1998); qualitative evaluation (through interviews and focus groups) also may be helpful (Cheek, et al., 2007); online discussion forums can be useful in assessing the impact of an experiential activity (the first author used a blackboard discussion forum to gather student feedback about the field trip to the state holocaust museum in which both BSW and MSW students participated); and content analysis of student postings is one qualitative research method that can provide useful information to the instructor about the activity’s impact.

CONCLUSION

Experiential exercises and teaching are crucial to effective social work education. They add another dimension to teaching by helping bridge theory and lectures with active learning via experience and self-discovery. More bluntly, these exercises may tap into the “feelings” of the students better than just writing papers or taking exams. As a result, such exercises have the potential to help students develop empathy toward (and thereby work effectively with) clients of diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Further, they engage students in reflexivity and the examination of issues through a critical lens. In order for these exercises to meet their objectives, however, it is crucial that the guidelines are clear and that student well-being always is taken into consideration. Moreover, a plan to incorporate student feedback about experiential exercises is essential not only to assess the impact of the exercises on the students’ emotions and cognitions but also to contribute to the modest but growing literature on outcomes of using experiential activities in the classroom.

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