Professional Development:
The International Journal of
Continuing Social Work Education

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Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	*Incorporating Follow-up to Evaluate the Impact of Continuing Professional Education Programs on Social Work Practice*
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Volume and Issue Number:	*Vol. 1 No. 1*
Manuscript ID:	*11016*
Page Number:	*16*
Year:	*1998*

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Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are $110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org **Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact**

Incorporating Follow-Up to Evaluate the Impact of Continuing Professional Education Programs on Social Work Practice

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Within recent years, three phenomena have occurred simultaneously within the field of social work. Program evaluations have become increasingly important as the public and profession demand greater accountability concerning effective practice and programs; licensure has become increasingly important, with all 50 states regulating the profession to some extent; and most social workers are required to participate in continuing education programs to maintain their licenses. Despite these trends, there has been a surprising lack of evaluations of the long-term impact of continuing professional education on practice.

Here, examined briefly are social work licensure and the requirements for social workers to participate in continuing professional education. Three levels of continuing professional education evaluations, and what can be learned from each, are presented. A conclusion is drawn by arguing that since the purpose of continuing professional education is to improve social workers' practice efforts, it is important for evaluators to collect follow-up data to assess the impact, if any, of continuing education on practice.

Licensure and Continuing Professional Education

The newly adopted Code of Ethics states that "social workers should routinely review the professional literature and participate in continuing education relevant to social work practice and social work ethics" (NASW n.d., p. 22). In order to promote participation in continuing education, "social work administrators and supervisors should take reasonable steps to provide or arrange for continuing education and staff development for all staff for whom they are responsible. Continuing education and staff development should address current knowledge and emerging developments related to social work practice and ethics" (NASW, n.d., p. 21).

Since 1992, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands have regulated social work by requiring practitioners to have either a license or certification (American Association of State Social Work Boards 1996b). As of 1996, 35 states and the District of Columbia require licensed or certified social workers to participate in continuing education. These states require, on average, 17.5 hours of continuing education per year. The remaining 15 states and territories do not require continuing education (American Association of State Social Work Boards 1996a).

Participation in continuing education among licensed or certified social workers is an important component of our professional lives (Doelker & Lynett, 1983), and it is critical that we evaluate the impact continuing education has on professional development and particularly on practice.

The Current Evaluation Focus

Current evaluations in social work have focused primarily on how practice interventions influence clients' behavior. As would be expected, evaluations have spanned the entire spectrum of social work practice. For example, evaluations have examined practice impacts on reducing anxiety, depression, and loneliness among homeless veterans (Lloyd-Cobb & Dixon, 1995); preventing child abuse (Dhooper & Schneider, 1995); improving social interactions of fifth graders (Hepler, 1994); helping unemployed older workers regain employment (Rife & Belcher, 1994); helping dually diagnosed adults change their sexual behaviors (Hanson, Cancel, & Rolon, 1994); changing the eating patterns of purging and nonpurging bulimics (Saunders & Saunders, 1993); and adjusting to divorce (Vera, 1993).

While evaluations of the impact of practice on clients' behavior is essential to the profession, much less work has been done in the area of evalu-

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ating the impact of continuing education on professionals' practice. Rooney (1988) discusses the presumed three levels of training effects: level one, whether theory and skills are cognitively learned; level two, whether workers are "able to practice newly acquired skills at the end of the training"; and level three, whether "workers will practice those skills in their jobs after training" (Rooney 1988, p. 2). Because of the difficulty in conducting level three evaluations, "it is not surprising that most evaluations have used cognitive tests of knowledge or role play tests at the conclusion of training" (Rooney 1988, p. 2).

Davenport (1992) notes that one of the weaknesses of evaluations in continuing social work education is their "inattention to post-training behavior changes" (p. 30). Similarly, Lindsey, Yarbrough, and Morton (1987) conclude that "further studies are needed to document retention or loss of skills and knowledge over time" (p. 634). Finally, Mueller (1985) argues,

> Of course, posttests alone can show how well students perform in reference to a predetermined criterion or standard of achievement, but there is no assurance that posttests given at the end of a course will be a valid indication of long-term knowledge retention. Nor can they measure actual behavioral changes that provide the basis for accountability. Staff and sponsor need to know, for example, whether participants in the course have acquired or extended their professional knowledge; whether they were helped to develop practice skills; whether the course had utility with regard to the actual requirements of their jobs; and whether the training delivery was cost effective. (p. 10)

Three Levels of Continuing Professional Education Evaluations

Based on Rooney's (1988) three levels of continuing professional education in social work, presented below are summaries of selected evaluations using each level, with an emphasis on the type of information gained from each evaluation level.

Level One Evaluations

A common way in which continuing professional education is evaluated is with a pretest-posttest design to examine whether participants have gained cognitive knowledge about the topic. For example, McCowan, McGregor, and LoTempio (1982) describe a pretest-posttest evaluation of a two week training program conducted by the Child Protective Training Institute. A competency-based criterion model was used to see if participants learned specific instructional objectives in investigation planning, law, assessment, and case management. Findings indicated that average posttest scores for the 24 participants increased significantly, although caseworker and total professional experience were negatively associated with scores.

Denning (1993) describes an evaluation of a family preservation training project for child welfare direct service workers and supervisors in Kansas. Participants' knowledge (e.g., theory, contracting, and interventions) and attitudes toward family preservation were measured with a pretest and a posttest. Her findings indicate that knowledge scores for direct service and supervisors increased significantly and that attitude scores for direct service workers also increased significantly between pretests and posttests. However, supervisors' attitude scores did not change significantly.

Level Two Evaluations

A second way of evaluating continuing professional education is to assess whether the participant leaves the training with the ability to practice what he or she has learned. Because of the timing of data collection for the evaluation, it is not possible to learn with any real certainty whether participants will actually use their new knowledge and skills in their practice. Using Rooney's (1988) language, such studies are on the second level of evaluations if participants are able to practice their newly acquired skills but do not investigate whether they actually use them in their practice.

Lindsey, Yarbrough, and Morton (1987) describe the evaluation of a short-term, interpersonal skills

training program. They used a pretest-posttest to examine the impact the program has on changing participants' potential professional behavior through the use of video taped simulated interviews. Video taped posttest data were collected at the end of the training program. They found that the program had a significant impact on participants' behaviors (e.g., reflections, attending, empathy, respect, and genuineness); participants' knowledge of the material; and participants' self-perceived skills.

Rooney (1988) examined the impact a program had on changing participants' use of task-centered skills shortly after completion of their training. Participants were audio taped with actual clients as soon as possible after the training sessions. Results from the experimental group were compared with a control group (those who wanted to but could not get into the program because of schedule conflicts). While not conclusive, his findings indicate, on the positive side, that participants generate more tasks, make more correct responses, and review tasks more thoroughly than nonparticipants. On the negative side, participants make more mistakes and are less likely to secure client input.

Level Three Evaluations

The third level evaluations Rooney (1988) discusses concern whether continuing education participants actually use the training's information in their practice. Since a main goal of continuing professional education is to improve participants' practice and knowledge, this level of evaluation is arguably the most important.

Bibus and Rooney (1995) used an experimental design to assess how a training program influences child welfare staff working with involuntary clients to use action plans. The focus was on ethnically sensitive practice, chemical health, and relapse prevention. As part of the training, participants "developed action plans in which they committed themselves to make at least three changes in their post-training practice" (p. 15). Telephone interviews were conducted with participants two to three months after the training to learn how participants use training content in their daily work. Participants reported that they continued to find the concepts and skills they learned in the training considerably useful.

> Participants reported gains in knowledge and skills in working with involuntary clients, cross-cultural practice and chemical health issues. Many mentioned that the training material developed by this project, including handouts, simulations, and videotapes contributed to these gains. There were also indirect indications from participants' descriptions of client reactions to attempts to put the training into practice that at least some interactions with clients were less hostile and more cooperative after the training than they might have been without it. The main concern expressed by participants was the lack of formal plans or directions for implementing the training's principles on an agency-wide basis. (pp. 18-19)

Bibus and Rooney (1995) conclude that "the results of these follow-up interviews indicate that much content in the training was in fact learned and applied well by most participants" (p. 19).

Mueller (1985) used a follow-up of a pretest-posttest evaluation of several continuing professional education courses that used the "participant action planning approach." Action plans were written in all of the classes. Follow-up data were collected three months after the training to see if the participants implemented the action plans. As a result of the follow-up, Mueller (1985) found that caseworkers were most likely to use course materials to improve their social work practice methods; income maintenance staff were most likely to incorporate social work values and methods into their interviews; and supervisors used course material to "increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their work units" (p. 11).

Weissman (1986) examined the extent to which participants in two action oriented post-MSW administration programs used the course content in

their practice after the courses ended. When the first course ended in December 1983 and the second ended in December 1984, participants were asked to complete a post-course plan describing what they "planned to do during the three months after the course was completed" (p. 9). Follow-up phone interviews were conducted in April 1984 for the first course and in March 1985 for the second.

> The overwhelming conclusion that can be drawn from the data is that both the major motivating factor and the major constraining factor are role demands. If the job was such that the material could be utilized, the participants invariably were motivated and, in fact, when helped to make the work connection by the instructor, did go further in reading and working with the material. While a specific question was not asked in the follow-up interviews, a number of respondents indicated that a support group of other people in the agency would have stimulated them further. All of this seems to indicate that from an agency point of view in-service training is far preferable as a strategy for continuing management training than courses offered outside the agency, at a university base, where participants select themselves. (p. 11)

Weissman (1986) concluded that "it is possible to argue that the goal of training is to improve the skill of individual workers and that the courses and the program, given that goal, were quite successful" (p. 11).

Mutschler (1984) discussed an on-the-job training program "in which practitioners were trained to use a range of single-case evaluation procedures" that would help participants with decision making in their day-to-day practice. In addition, participants were to "identify treatment goals and monitor the effectiveness of specific interventions used in reaching these goals" (p. 332). The six participants were interviewed four months after the project concerning extent of use, usefulness for adoption and continued use, and reasons for use or nonuse.

Findings indicated that all six participants used a "Target Problem Measure" using a time series single-case evaluation model, and varying numbers of participants used other measures as well. In regard to the second area, the follow-up interviews indicated that "of the fifteen evaluation procedures taught during the training period, ten were judged useful, but only seven were actually employed at the time of follow-up" (p. 334). Finally, the author found that several factors affect the use of single-subject evaluations in practice, including relevance to practice, usefulness for practice, involvement of the practitioners in the design and implementation of the evaluation, and the organizational context of the evaluation. Mutschler concluded by writing that "the findings of the present study can be summarized as follows: Initially negative or neutral attitudes of practitioners toward the importance and usefulness of research can change through practitioner involvement in the development and application of evaluation procedures" (p. 336).

Finally, this author evaluated a series of workshops for professionals who work with pregnant and parenting teens to increase their knowledge of the impact of substance use during pregnancy. A pretest-posttest cognitive instrument indicates that the workshop resulted in statistically significant gains in participants' knowledge of substance use during pregnancy and in their confidence in using the information in their practice. Approximately three to four months after the workshop 30 of the 190 participants were interviewed face-to-face concerning their use of the workshop material.

Findings from the follow-up interviews indicate that, overall, participants felt they gained factual and conceptual information from the workshops. Participants also reported that they use the information in a variety of ways and with a range of individuals and groups (i.e., not only pregnant and parenting teens). For example, participants reported that they often use the knowledge gained from the workshop "as is" with colleagues and with some clients. However, they may need to modify the material to make it more appropriate for use with other clients.

Conclusion

With the increasing emphasis on licensure and state-regulated social work practice, there will be a corresponding increase in the emphasis placed on providing effective continuing professional education for social workers. Due to more public demands for fiscal and professional accountability, there will also be increasing pressure for social service agencies and continuing professional education providers to demonstrate that the time and money spent in such activities have positive impacts on social work practice.

This study has expanded upon Rooney's (1988) suggestion that there are three levels of continuing education evaluation: whether participants cognitively learn the material; whether participants have the ability to use their new knowledge in their practice; and whether and how participants actually use their new knowledge in their practice.

All three evaluation levels provide evaluators with useful information. However, information gained from the third level is perhaps the most important and without a doubt the most difficult to obtain. Third level evaluations allow us to know if program participants actually use the information from the trainings in their practice, how it is used, and the impact of continuing education programs on practice.

Third level evaluations also enable us to gain insight into areas that evaluators may not have considered prior to designing the evaluation. Bibus and Rooney (1995) suggest that some of the participants' clients are less hostile and more cooperative. Mueller (1985) learned that different components of the training were used by different groups of professionals, depending upon their positions within the agency. This researcher learned that participants use material from continuing education in different ways, either "as is" or modified, depending upon the audience.

As the above review of level three studies indicates, there are several ways in which follow-up data can be collected. In order for evaluators to assess thoroughly the impact of continuing professional education on practice, not just their knowledge or their practice potential, it is important to evaluate these programs' long-term impacts on participants' actual practice.

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