



Authentic Learning: How a Community and University Partnership Codeveloped an Advanced Trauma-Informed Practice Framework for Educating Graduate Social Work Students

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Authentic Learning: How a Community and University Partnership Codeveloped an Advanced Trauma-Informed Practice Framework for Educating Graduate Social Work Students</i>
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Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol.26 No.1</i>
Manuscript ID:	261046
Page Number:	46
Year:	2023

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work or its Center for Social and Behavioral Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published two times a year (Spring and Winter) by the Center for Social and Behavioral Research at 1923 San Jacinto, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. 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

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Abstract:

Social workers frequently encounter individuals who have experienced trauma in settings such as child welfare, addictions, and mental health (Knight, 2015). The literature suggests that social workers in these practice contexts often feel ill-equipped to work with these service users, potentially resulting in poor health and treatment outcomes (Knight, 2015). Social work education has a responsibility to provide trauma-informed knowledge and skills to students while continually assessing the needs of the local community. This article outlines how a community and university partnership developed an innovative experiential and authentic course assignment for MSW students to learn more about trauma-informed practice from a critical perspective.

Introduction

Trauma-informed social work practice evolves from the understanding that most service users have experienced some form of trauma in life that has informed how they cope with stressors and how they understand themselves, others, and the world around them (Levenson, 2017). Through a trauma-informed lens, social workers integrate the core principles of safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment into service delivery to avoid retraumatization and to break the cycle of unhealthy interpersonal dynamics (Levenson, 2017; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Structural social work theory contributes a critical antioppressive analysis for understanding trauma that recognizes how institutions perpetuate ingrained social biases and dominant perspectives such as paternalism and colonialism, which can reinforce violence, maintain trauma, and produce barriers to accessing services (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). While social workers are employed in high-stress settings such as child protection, addictions, mental health, and corrections, many social workers often feel ill-equipped to address the trauma-related needs of the service users, leading to poor health and treatment outcomes (Knight, 2015).

An experiential and authentic learning environment is considered an effective way to prepare graduate social work students for the advanced direct practice skills they need to address this gap. The purpose of this article is to describe the process of collaboration between community practitioners and university academics in designing an online, trauma-informed educational social work practice experience for graduate students using authentic learning strategies.

Authentic Learning

Authentic learning is an instructional design approach in which specific strategies are used to help students connect academic knowledge with real-world issues and problems (Herrington & Herrington, 2006). The literature suggests that authentic learning experiences, whether practiced within traditional classroom settings or through online learning, should be immersive and provide real world contexts as the key methodology (Herrington et al., 2014; Lombardi, 2007; Vo et al., 2018). Pillay (2021) believes that applied learning, through an authentic learning approach, is desirable for enhancing professional education in social work. Authentic learning strategies help social work students better prepare for practice, accelerates learning by integrating concepts and theories into 'real-life' examples, enhances critical thinking capacity, aids in formulation of professional identities and self-efficacy, and enhances reflection in action (Dewer & Clement, 2016; Haston & Russell, 2012). Most often, social work education uses a case study approach to help students to explore complex situations and ethical dilemmas and to assist practitioners with choosing the best course of action from a range of alternatives (Bowers & Pack, 2017). These outcomes directly align with core social work education learning objectives of professional identity development, engagement with knowledge and skills through interactive practices, and the development of a professional practice framework which are standard outcomes for all accredited schools of social work in Canada (Canadian Association of Social Work Education

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[CASWE], 2021). To meet or exceed these standards and to promote realistic learning that reflects the complexity of social worker practice, instructors must begin by focusing on creating a design for the authentic learning framework.

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) developed an authentic learning framework which consists of three main components: a) defining the desired outcomes, b) determining the evaluation evidence, and c) planning the teaching. Therefore, before planning the authentic learning activities instructors must determine the overarching goal of the authentic learning project, identify how the learning will be evaluated, and then design performance tasks to align with desired outcomes and evaluation methods. Most social workers in academia are familiar with the tasks associated with “syllabus development,” and the framework of Wiggins and McTighe (2005) closely approximates models currently used in social work education. However, to provide students with an authentic learning experience educators must also be able to emulate the discipline’s contextual reality, stimulate students’ critical thinking abilities, and encourage self-directed learning (Macdiarmid et al., 2021). To accomplish this goal, it’s important to engage with existing social work expertise within the community, since it would be unlikely that any one instructor would have practice knowledge covering the diverse range of trauma experience found in the populations being served by social service agencies.

Community involvement with universities has been largely connected to research studies and program evaluations that are valuable in promoting understanding and academic scholarship, but for the most part universities are disconnected from the social and political realities of current community concerns (Soudien, 2016). Furthermore, universities have typically been branded as the “ivory tower” due to perceived detachment from the surrounding community (Tshishonga, 2022). However, social work practitioners within communities have much to contribute to knowledge production at universities. In social work, connection to the community is most readily found in field education, which has been lauded as the signature pedagogy of social work (Ayala et al., 2018; Bogo et al., 2020; Egan et al., 2018). Field placements are a requirement for all accredited schools of social work (CASWE, 2021) and occupy a fundamental space within

social work practice due to “the profession’s widely held belief that practice-based learning is essential to the development of core competencies in the education and preparation of future social workers” (Ayala et al., 2018, p. 281). Social work practitioners in community become extensions of the university by supervising social work students throughout the completion of their field placements; by preparing students for the demands of practice, offering mentorship and guidance; and by ensuring that students meet educational expectations as set out by their respective professional associations (Ayala et al., 2018; Bogo et al., 2020).

The primary goal of social work coursework is to provide foundational knowledge and skill development that students will later demonstrate in their field placements. However, there is opportunity to integrate this formal education with practice when social work education integrates community needs, knowledge, and skills into coursework. Social work instruction tends to rely on professional practice histories, research, and prior teaching experience to inform their pedagogy, yet the practice experience may be dated or the practice context may be limited to experiences outside of the current community. While guest speakers from the community may be invited to class to supplement content presented on course topics, their involvement in course development and design is often lacking. Unfortunately, this disconnection creates separation between knowledge taught in the classroom and the reality of the local community context.

Ross et al. (2017) suggest that a gap exists between what educators teach and how social workers practice. Traditionally, instructors provide social work practice theories in their courses and may provide explanations using case examples, with minimal opportunity for the students to observe the application of the theory in real-world social work contexts outside of field placements. Bridging theory and practice through real-world social work modeling and the inclusion of social work experts provides an opportunity for authentic learning (Payne, 2014). While the university classroom is “real life” for university students, the challenge is to bridge the gap between the university learning experience and the world beyond academia to prepare students to become competent and critical practitioners. This gap may be addressed by authentic learning. With

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authentic learning the role of the instructor is to ease the learner into the community, “providing opportunities for the learner to engage in the real activities and use the language of the community...In this way learners are given ‘space’ to make sense of what it means to be part of a community of practice” (Stein et al., 2004, p. 240).

The Real-World Relevance of Authentic Learning

Authentic classroom learning for students reflects a combination of personal meaning and purposefulness within an appropriate social and disciplinary framework: “The learning experience is authentic for the learner while simultaneously being authentic to a community of practice” (Stein et al., 2004, p. 241). Understanding the community of practice addressing trauma includes making future social work practitioners aware that service users tend to have complex histories which include exposure to trauma and adverse circumstances (Chemtob et al., 2011). Without understanding the complexity of trauma from a trauma-informed approach, social workers could further exacerbate an already traumatic situation (Atwood, 2019). Therefore, choosing the most knowledgeable and skilled community practitioners for informing students about the diverse impacts of trauma became an important part for planning performance tasks. Since child protection is one of the largest employers of new social work graduates, there was a real need to include social work practitioners from child protection in the authentic learning course project. A senior child welfare program manager and a social work educator/trainer were invited to participate in developing an authentic learning module addressing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and child protection.

Existing research indicates that practicing social workers often experience vicarious trauma (Kim et al., 2021). Vicarious trauma refers to the “cumulative, pervasive, and damaging effects on the clinician that occur from chronic exposure to clients’ traumatic material...negatively impacting the clinician’s sense of self and could result in ongoing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder” (Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012, p. 646). Therefore, the authentic learning working group for the project included a social work practitioner who had over 30 years of social work experience in social work education, community crisis inter-

vention, and trauma-informed clinical practice working with first responders in Health Canada, Military and Veterans Services, and the National Psychosocial Emergency Response Team.

While social workers frequently work with service users with a history of trauma, this is especially true for social workers in Indigenous communities, where Indigenous peoples have four times the risk of experiencing severe trauma than nonIndigenous populations (Haskell & Randall, 2009). In Canada, historical trauma is experienced by Indigenous populations because of structural inequality inherent to federal and provincial socioeconomic policies and events such as the Sixties Scoop and the legacy of Residential Schools. Considering the existing health and social welfare disparities between Indigenous and nonIndigenous peoples in Canada it is essential that social work education addressing trauma includes Indigenous knowledge and skills. Given the long-term impacts of colonialism, it is essential to address historical and race-based trauma by supporting and highlighting acts of resilience. The participation of Indigenous social workers was essential to the authenticity of this project and the working group included an Indigenous social policy advocate with experience working on child welfare policy reform.

Sexual violence and IPV are significant social and public health issues that impact one in three women (Modi et al., 2014). The impact of gender-based violence interconnects the physical, mental, social, and behavioural sphere (Guggisberg, 2018), bringing individuals into regular contact with social workers. In response to these important issues, the working group recruited a social worker from the nonprofit sector with over 35 years of experience addressing issues such as IPV, sexual abuse, trauma, and grief.

The university team at the School of Social Work comprised two faculty members with extensive and diverse experience as social work practitioners. One faculty member has over 18 years of frontline and supervisory experience working for the public sector in child welfare and long-term care, and the instructor for the direct practice course has over a decade of clinical practice and supervisory experience working in a nonprofit organization with individuals with eating disorders, most with extensive trauma histories. By building relationships with the community of social work practitioners, the project

team had over 200 years of combined social work experience in various fields of practice. When comparing this with the 15 years of clinical practice experience of the course instructor, it is not difficult to imagine the quality of the knowledge and skills that was brought into this project through the collaboration.

Even with years of practice experience, university instructors may remain somewhat removed from communities of practice and may find it difficult to establish authentic contexts (Stein et al., 2004). The community partners were key to identifying critical issues that their counseling work which service users had revealed over the course of their practice. In return for their participation in the project, the practitioners gained knowledge into curriculum development, were able to develop professional networks with other social work practitioners in the field, and learned more about trauma-informed practices with diverse populations. When asked about their main “take-away” from working on the project, one team member stated that they appreciated “understanding of the amount of time, effort, and engagement that goes into the development of a university course.” Whereas another team member highlighted that they would apply some of the new knowledge to their current practice, noting “I learned from a more deeper dive into what trauma-informed is and how it’s applied to specific context of IPV, which will be transferred to my work in child protection.” While the initial goal of the project was to develop an authentic learning experience for social work students, these additional benefits demonstrated the tangible value of authentic learning and community partnership.

The Design

The role of community partners was to design a case scenario, based on their unique practice knowledge and experience, for the purpose of developing an authentic learning module that supported student learning by asking them to complete counselling activities related to trauma-informed care. The design of the authentic learning activity for each module was informed by two main elements: a) an audio-recorded case study scenario (with the service user portrayed by an actor) to expose students to complex practice themes and ethical dilemmas, and b) assessment of the students’ chosen course of action in addressing each of five case studies, which were

evaluated by direct practitioners recruited from the community as reviewers. Each of the five case scenarios required students to work through the stages of the counselling process: a) assessment, b) learning about the trauma experience, c) identification of triggers, d) development of healthy coping skills, and e) processing trauma/integration. The case scenarios were different for each module to make students introduce sociopolitical and cultural analyses to their interventions.

The authentic approach to designing each module enabled the working group to apply real-world, authentic elements at every phase of the design process to enhance the overall pedagogy of the course. Providing an authentic context refers to a development of a learning environment that reflects the way the knowledge will be used in real life (Herrington & Herrington, 2006; Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Ornellas et al., 2019). It should be noted here that the direct practice course was designed during the COVID-19 pandemic when virtual learning environments became mandatory for continuing university education. Out of necessity the approach to course development moved away from the traditional in-person lecture to focus on developing immersive virtual technologies which could be effective in enhancing students’ engagement and knowledge in social work education. It was decided by the working group that each counselling session would be conducted via a “podcast” of a client scenario, using a paid actor and a script. Finding a suitable online program application was a task assigned to the instructor of the course since each module had to incorporate several different elements including PowerPoint lectures, suggested readings, videos, and self-care instructions for each clinical simulation.

Planning for the Mode of Delivery

The initial meeting of the working group focused on identifying the forms of trauma to be addressed in five direct practice learning modules. The instructor for the course explained the learning outcomes for the course and for each module of the authentic learning assignment. It was considered essential to the authenticity of the learning activity that the university partners remained open to different approaches to developing the modules to allow for enriched content. Patterns of communication were important in the initial planning stage to clearly maintain the

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identified needs and potential benefits of partnership (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). A planned schedule of meetings was essential to the consistency necessary for developing each module, and the community partners members expressed appreciation for the opportunity to engage in group brainstorming and critical reflection on their progress. As one member stated, “I appreciated the monthly meetings as they provided clarity of expectations when required.” While another member agreed, they also reported an additional benefit of the meetings, saying “The regular meetings to share information and updates worked the best. The coming together in-person helped to build relationships.” Finally, another member highlighted the importance of the process of the community-university partnership, noting “It is very effective to work in collaboration with like-minded professionals, we all bring an important perspective to the process. Having the school of SW as the leader in this initiative was important, kept us all on track with collegial interactions.”

The community-university partnership allowed for each module to be developed with a different practice focus and highlighted various skill approaches from social workers in the field. In each module, students had a chance to watch practitioners explain their practice working within a trauma-informed approach. Being able to observe this process facilitated student learning as to how these skills could be applied in their own practice. For example, within the first assessment module, students were able to observe how social workers approached assessment with an individual presenting with trauma. Students heard practitioners’ narratives and stories of how they navigated the service user’s explanation of the impact of trauma. By including a structural and intersectional lens, students were able to learn how they could adjust their approach to addressing trauma based on the population they were working with. In the first module on assessing trauma, students learned about assessment with a queer, trans, and nonbinary individual, and how the use of inclusive language contributes to safety, a key characteristic of a trauma informed approach. If the goal is for students to develop professional skills, the required knowledge and skills need to be modeled in real social work contexts.

Coaching and scaffolding should be used to promote learning through support, encouragement, and guidance (Herrington & Herrington,

2006). While the instructor for the advanced direct practice course provided weekly engagement, support, and problem-solving during classroom lectures and activities, it was the community-based social workers within the trauma field that evaluated student learning and provided them with constructive feedback for each module.

Integrating Multiple Roles and Perspectives

Environments that promote authentic learning provide students the opportunity to examine a topic from multiple theoretical and practical perspectives (Ornellas et al., 2019). Multiple roles and perspectives refer to how students and educators share knowledge and expertise, which allows students to examine the issues from diverse perspectives. The authentic learning experience in the advanced direct practice course integrated multiple roles and perspectives in three main ways: a) through the development of the community-university partnership, b) by asking students to link practice theories to application in addressing forms of trauma based on the experiences of people from diverse populations, and c) by using multiple modalities to explore the topics.

The community-university partnership became the foundational knowledge modality for integrating multiple perspectives in the course. Each community partner brought their own knowledge and practice experience in addressing trauma into the development of the modules, which encouraged further discussion and reflection on how various populations in the community experience trauma differently. The decision was made by the working group to develop learning modules that reflected that diversity. One of the community members highlighted that “the project structure emphasized the importance of working with skilled and knowledgeable group[s] to develop quality course materials.” By including skilled practitioners, students would gain rich knowledge and skills that they may not have experienced in traditional classroom strategies. Another community member summed it up well, noting that “bringing all backgrounds together contributes to a wholeness.”

According to Fink’s (2013) taxonomy of significant learning there are six elements that overlap and intersect at significant learning. These are foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. Foundational knowledge has to do with both remembering and understanding key

concepts. This foundational knowledge was strategically organized for each module and could be explored by students using multiple modalities (e.g. recorded lecture, videos, readings, and so on). Application of the foundational knowledge involved students first reading and viewing the material content within each module and later applying it in an audio-video taped response to an audio-videorecorded client scenario. Students were asked to think about how they would apply the trauma-informed foundational knowledge with different populations such as newcomer, non binary, and Indigenous populations. While the modules could not cover all the scenarios presented when working with diverse groups, they introduced students to the understanding that there are sociopolitical and cultural factors which must be considered when working with service users.

Another way that this project integrated multiple perspectives was by introducing diverse social work theories and approaches for addressing trauma. Integration involves students making connections between ideas, with the human dimension offered by the activities in the modules providing an opportunity to learn how to form positive helping relationships with others. Learning about the importance of theory is one aspect to practice knowledge, but this project helped students to see how the theories addressing trauma worked to enhance existing social work skills and knowledge, since all students in the advanced practice course are already social work practitioners in the community. In each module, students were asked to videotape a counselling response to each scenario, emphasizing empathy and caring and avoiding pathologizing. At the end of each module, students were given information on self-care strategies to make them aware of the possible impact of vicarious trauma. Building self-care into the modules enhanced student understanding of the profound impact that trauma can have for service users.

Learning how to learn is a key skill for social work students that have been away from academia for several years. Herrington and Herrington (2006) identify that using various resources and media allows students to learn with intention by examining and distinguishing relevant real-world information and practice as if they are professionals. Collaborative construction of knowledge through supplemental classroom activities in the course provided students with the opportunity to engage with each other as community practitioners with years of experience. Students were

required to work in small groups to present a case study from their own practice experience which explored how trauma-related practice could have better informed their approach. This activity occurred at the midpoint of the semester and facilitated students in applying their foundational learnings from the modules so that they become active contributors to their own knowledge.

Schon's (1987) learning systems theory highlights how professional education can use reflection to help students to handle complex problems of actual practice. Critical reflection is an integral part of social work professional practice and involves the identification of deep-rooted assumptions and personal experiences within social, cultural, and structural context (Askeland & Fook, 2009). Askeland and Fook (2009) suggest that through reflection, students can examine their actions, unearth embedded values and assumptions in their practice, and compare how their practice corresponds with an intended theory. In each module, students were asked to prepare a case summary and to reflect on how they would attend to sociocultural, economic, and structural considerations; how they would integrate feedback from their community reviewer; and to critically reflect on how their practice would change based on this new practice knowledge.

Lessons Learned

There are benefits and challenges to working in community-university partnerships. Administration is important, and this includes documentation, scheduling, and providing critical information to all members of the working group. Regularly scheduled meetings helped to facilitate the communication of information so that community partners had a shared vision of learning objectives and an understanding of their role in meeting those objectives. While the community members bring a wealth of practice-based knowledge, they may not understand elements of course development and/or have experience with educating and training others. Part of the process of designing the authentic learning activities involved sharing information about the elements of course development. For this project, the instructor provided a general template of what each module should look like while leaving the members with creative freedom on how they would address trauma within their assigned case scenario. In addition, it was important to discuss the theories taught in the course, which are reflected in current research and scholarship on trauma-informed practice. While all the team members had experience with trauma-informed practice, the theory inform-

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ing that practice differed across contexts.

Communication was essential to the success of the project, and this was facilitated through virtual and in-person check-in meetings with the course instructor. While the community practitioners developed much of the content for the modules, it was important that there was a faculty member to oversee and review the content for consistency and congruence with course objectives. The content also had to be at an advanced level for a Master of Social Work course. Although it was planned to have one community practitioner per module, it did not take long to become aware that this was too high of a demand for social workers who were busy working in the field. This meant that additional community practitioners were needed to help develop the modules. Therefore, it is essential to have multiple team members available to work on each module so that the demand on their time is manageable and timelines for the project can be realistically met. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the work that community members provided in the development of the course. A final meeting of the working group was considered an official launch for the project and included a luncheon at a local hotel and a demonstration of one of the modules, representing the culmination of their work on the course. All course materials, as well as the course website, provide the names of the community practitioners contributing to the authentic learning project.

Conclusion

This community-university partnership was effective in cocreating an authentic learning opportunity in a direct practice course on trauma designed for graduate level social work students. Community partners bring a wealth of diverse knowledge, including a frontline understanding of community priorities and context, while academia brings knowledge and experience for effective teaching strategies and for introducing new perspectives from current social work scholarship. These partnerships need to be encouraged to create additional opportunities for practice-based learning. If the purpose of social work education is to prepare students for practice, then social work educators need to create opportunities for authentic learning beyond field practicums. There are also significant potential benefits in develop-

ing authentic learning opportunities using online and digital platforms that make learning more accessible and flexible for students. The course was provided in a hybrid format in which students were able to work on the direct practice modules on their own time, with class time scheduled intermittently throughout the semester. This approach facilitated one of the course objectives, which was to mentor students on “learning how to learn.” which promotes life-long learning and continuing professional development.

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