

Ethical Delegates in the Social Work Classroom: A Creative Pedagogical Approach

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Abstract

Social work literature clearly demonstrates that ethics play a central role in defining and developing the profession. The purpose of this paper is to describe a pedagogical framework that supports students in becoming ethical delegates through creative classroom assignments. This framework reflects a personal perspective and provides the reader with a starting place to explore innovative teaching techniques within the classroom in order to foster a creative and safe place for students to enjoy learning about authentic ethical dilemmas.

Key Words: Creative pedagogy, ethical delegate, social work, ethics

Introduction

Within the social work classroom, effective and innovative teaching strategies are being used to enhance the interest and motivation of students in the area of ethics, including the application of the Council on Social Work Education's curriculum policy on ethics integration and the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (CSWE, 1994; NASW, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to describe a pedagogical framework that supports students in becoming ethical delegates. The authors, in collaboration with previous students, developed the concept of students as ethical delegates after several classroom discussions surrounding ethical practice within the profession. The authors define ethical delegates as those who are able to see ethics as something they are, not merely as something they are required to follow according to educational and professional policy. As a result of this understanding, delegates develop the knowledge and ability to function and navigate their way through the intricate, unclear, and changing landscapes of ethical social work practice as well as everyday life.

To date, several research studies focusing on unethical practices of social workers have been conducted (Dziech & Weiner, 1990; Jacobs, 1991; Singer, 1994; Strom-Gottfried, 1999). Most notable have been studies on inappropriate sexual relationships (Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994; Mittendorf & Schroeder, 2005; Reamer, 1984, 1992, 1994, 1995), academician/teacher as

therapist (Borys & Pope, 1989; Roberts, Murrell, Thomas, & Claxton, 1982; Stout, 1987), and other forms of dual relationship violations (DuMez & Reamer, 2003; Freud & Krug, 2002; Gripton & Valentich, 2003; Mayer, 2005; Reamer, 2003) . A trend toward increasing unethical practices within the profession has led to guidelines being developed to help practitioners negotiate issues and risks that they encounter (NASW, 2000; Reamer, 2003). CSWE also mandates that ethics and values be integrated throughout the curriculum (CSWE, 1994) and NASW's *Code of Ethics* (2000) applies ethical standards to instructors as well as students. This article further expands the application of the NASW *Code of Ethics* by focusing on competent educational practices within the classroom, specifically incorporating the practice of ethical standards: "(4.01a) competent practice; (4.01b) becoming and remaining proficient in professional practice...through critical examination and keeping current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work....and review the professional literature; and (4.01c) basing my practice on recognized knowledge, including empirically based knowledge relevant to social work and social work ethics" (NASW, 2000, p. 22).

Most practitioners and educators would agree that ethics are lived and practiced in every moment of social work and are therefore one of the most important, if not the most important, aspects of social work education. Many also would agree that creativity is an essential element of ethical social work practice. That is, ethical social work practice involves a synergy of humanly involved compassion, empathy, sincerity, critical consciousness, and creativity. There is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach to social work practice. Throughout our careers, social workers find ways to create resources, networks, and support systems for our clients as well as ourselves. Academicians should also hold themselves to the same standard of competent practice by identifying new and creative resources for our students by keeping current with emerging knowledge, reviewing relevant literature on effective pedagogical practices, and then basing the classroom practice on that knowledge.

Preparing social work students for ethical practice begins in the classroom. Introducing students to ethical dilemmas often begins in courses such as Research Methods, Understanding Human Behavior and the Environment, Introduction to Social Work, and Social Work with At-Risk Populations. Topics covered in these courses include client rights, confidentiality, informed consent, boundary issues, documentation, fraud, termination of services, and service delivery. Boland-Prom & Anderson (2005) point out that "while progress has been made in social work

education and training on ethics, more effort is needed” (p. 495). In Dodd and Jansson’s (2004) review of social work ethics curricula, they discovered two key findings: 1) while social work students are trained in how to recognize ethical dilemmas, they are not fully invited to participate in the process as equals, and 2) while the training they received did relate to their awareness and desire to participate in the ethical resolution process, they had not been trained in how to engage themselves in the resolution process.

A number of theoretical and empirical studies have validated the call for the individualization of ethics. These studies show that an individual’s moral identity and the concerns that stem from that moral identity are the best predictors of a person’s loyalty to morality (Damon & Gregory, 1997). A person’s moral identity embraces both the personal -- what a person considers to be right or wrong--and the rationale--why she or he is obligated to follow through with a specific course of action (Damon, 1999). Damon explains that it is a person’s code of morality that makes ethical negotiation and consensus possible, not the other way around. Colby and Damon’s (1992) research also indicate that sustained moral dedication requires a merging of both self and morality and that the education process of morality and ethics must fundamentally focus on the development of the moral identity (Damon, 1999). Ifor students to develop an awareness of their moral identity, critical analysis and application of who they are and where they have come from must take place.

To engage in the process of critical thought, students must step back from themselves, an extremely difficult task for first year social work students and commence the process of "thinking." Although this "thinking" can be transformative, it does not always engage the student’s sense of self. Rather, the focus is more on the cognitive processes of moral judgment and reflection. However, as Bauman (1993) explains,

Unless moral responsibility arises from the heart (and is) somehow rooted in the very way we humans are -- it would never be conjured up at a later stage by no matter how high-minded or high-handed an effort. When competing moral demands arise in the moment, it is the moral self that moves, feels, and acts in the context of that ambiguity, and no moral impulse can implement itself unless the moral actor feels compelled to stretch the effort to the limit (p. 34).

Based on this understanding of ethics as a deeply personal and private process that is lived in the complexity of everyday social work practice, the challenge becomes that of developing a pedagogy that supports students in becoming ethical delegates within both their personal and professional lives. The goal for the student is to see ethics not as a code to follow, but as something

they are, and to develop the knowledge and ability to live in, and navigate their way through the intricate, unclear, and ever-changing environment of ethical social work practice.

In reflecting on this challenge, it occurred to us that what is required from instructors is to find ways to develop the students' creative side within the classroom experience. That is, if social work students are supposed to be able to live in the ever-changing environment of ethical social work, they needed the ability to create and re-create themselves and their responses within the moment. Similarly, if they are to learn to be creative, they need a pedagogy that supports this learning framework. In order to practice competently and ethically in the classroom, instructors must constantly review current research on classroom pedagogy and innovative instructional strategies. The majority of this research indicates an increased need for inclusion of creativity and critical thinking within the class curriculum. In reviewing this research, teaching philosophies of instructors may evolve in order to assimilate this new information. Instructors may begin to use a myriad of instructional methods, incorporating innovative ideas and theories to help students creatively apply ethics in both their personal and professional lives. This ongoing learning and transformation may help instructors see that social work, in essence, is a creative process and that a pedagogy that emphasizes the development of creativity is fundamental within the classroom. A caring and critical pedagogy that fosters creativity, a component sometimes lacking in social work education, provides a comprehensive learning experience for students while also encouraging critical thought, application, creativity, and ethical awareness.

Creative Pedagogy Defined

Creative pedagogy actively engages the student in an enjoyable learning and application process through the use of different activities, varied lecture formats, innovative classroom activities, and assorted homework activities. "The principal premise of creative pedagogy is that learning should be fun. The joy of education is, for the most part, related to its creative nature, to pleasure achieved through problem solving. This does not mean that all the education should be creative only" (Zlotin & Zusman, 1999, p. 10). Freire (1974) points out that conventional pedagogy (i.e., lecture-listen) is obviously not fun; it fosters a passive reception of information and the acquisition of knowledge that has little, if any, application to the social problems that social workers encounter today. This one-way exchange, combined with hypothetical case studies, often distances students from the applied nature of ethical resolution (Freire, 1974).

Freire (1974) also emphasizes the importance of creativity in the development of critical analysis and perspective within the critical pedagogy. He explores the notion that "correct thinking" should have elements of curiosity, creativity, and re-creativity. We agree with Freire that creative thought is essential. However, becoming and developing an identity as an ethical delegate requires moving beyond a level of cognition. Students must also be enthusiastically engaged in the creative process of self and knowledge development. The first author (hereafter referred to as Marian), therefore, sought to develop a pedagogy that would inspire social work students to tap into and use their creative, imaginative power to revise, adapt, expand, and alter themselves and their knowledgeable practice while also providing an enjoyable learning experience.

Teaching Ethical Resolution through Creativity

May (1975) suggests that creativity is part of our everyday experience. It not only serves as a significant part within our lives, but also has remarkable and immeasurable consequences for the surrounding social world (Runco & Albert, 1990). Each person views creativity in its own context, and rarely, outside of the arts, do professionals feel comfortable engaging their creative processes. Additionally, to approach the area of ethics creatively often seems inappropriate and at times frightening. Something is either wrong or it is right; it is black, or it is white. Finding grays, blues, and reds between the black and white lines of ethics is often not the most popular approach to exploring and resolving ethical problems. Therefore, as Marian worked to develop a pedagogy that would support the development of creative ethical practice, four objectives guided her work. First, an approach to teaching ethics needed to be developed that would spark students' moral imagination. Second, learning process infusing the self and the lived experiences of the students would also need to be developed. Third, recognizing that ethics are lived in the everyday real world, it seemed important that the pedagogy should somehow include a critical focus to highlight hidden values and assumptions shaping students and the ethical situations they experience, as well as foster development of their critical thinking skills. Finally, since social work ethics are a somewhat ambiguous and challenging terrain, it was vital that the teaching/guiding process involve itself in the real-world drama of everyday practice, as it is often ambiguous and challenging.

Marian's intent as a social work academician was not only to promote conscious awareness of her students' values, their stereotypes, and practices, but also to promote the development of their creativity. Feldman (1999) asserts that creativity is essentially a matter of development. He posits that we are all born with the ability to create, but how that ability is manifested depends on

our own unique life experiences. As one develops and matures, creative expression either flourishes or is neglected while simultaneously being influenced and affected by the social world around us. Feldman's research (1999) explains that depending on the professional field of practice, creative expression can be nurtured or rejected. With this in mind, Marian's primary goal was to provide a learning environment in which students felt free to play and to use their imagination and their senses to bring creative form to their learning. As they gained more awareness of themselves by looking at their everyday decision-making processes, they were asked to consider if the awareness and knowledge they had gained was helping them become a better student or practitioner as well as a new and improved version of their former selves.

An Example: The Classroom Experience

Based on the desire to foster creative expression in the classroom, Marian introduced a different approach to ethical problem solving into the classroom. Essentially, Marian's goal was to provide opportunities for student engagement in self-analysis, so they would question their existing moral and ethical code, as well as understand how to assimilate the three. This self-analysis was done through asking them to call on their own life experiences. This way, as students examined a broad range of theory and knowledge, they did so in a deeply, personal, and individual manner.

The following brief example provides an overview of several creative teaching techniques used in the classroom to engage students in the application of critical thought. To arouse student interest immediately at the onset of the course, they were provided with an authentic student paper from a previous HBSE class. All identifying information had been removed, and the final grade marked on the paper was an "F" that was due to the commission of direct plagiarism. The second the paper was distributed; their attention was focused.

Students were instructed to write down their immediate thoughts, feelings, and reactions from a student perspective about the failing grade on the paper and the word "plagiarism" written across the title page in bold red highlighter. They were then instructed to write their feelings, thoughts, and reactions from an instructor perspective. The second assignment proved to be more difficult. No student had any prior experience as an instructor or educator and therefore had no true perspective from which to draw. The third stage of the assignment was for each student to write a letter to the Department Chair from the student perspective, explaining the reasons for plagiarism and pleading their case for non- suspension from the social work program. The fourth stage involved each student developing a written plan of action from an instructor perspective on

possible ways to handle the situation. This task proved difficult, as well, as many students were unfamiliar with existing protocols to handle academic misconduct. The fifth stage of the assignment included each student reviewing the NASW *Code of Ethics* and identifying which ethical standards the student had violated and explain in his or her own words why plagiarism was unethical. Students were also informed that proper citation of the NASW *Code* was required, so they themselves would not be guilty of plagiarizing on this assignment. Students were also informed that as this was a learning experience, if plagiarism did occur, no action was going to be taken. The final stage of the assignment was for each student to participate in classroom discussion focusing on differing points of view, approaches to resolving the dilemma, assumptions made regarding possible problem resolution strategies, examining factual data provided in the example, shared concepts and ideas about the original ethical problem, and implications and consequences of the actions of both the student and the instructor.

The purpose of this exercise was five-fold: 1) help students empathize with the writer of the plagiarized paper, 2) help students empathize with the instructor, 3) help them understand that they themselves could be guilty of plagiarizing without direct knowledge of exactly what plagiarism constitutes, 4) help develop critical thinking skills, and 5) become familiar with the NASW *Code of Ethics*. Reactions from students at the conclusion of class were on target. They were able to identify possible reasons for student plagiarism, understand the reaction of the instructor, and understand that ethical resolution does not involve “judging” others, but rather assessing actions. They were also able to apply critical problem-solving skills to determine possible courses of actions.

Teaching Focus, Trust, and Letting Go

Hart (1998) posits that creativity begins with focus. One's focus often emerges out of conscious and deliberate intent. As described above, the overriding focus of Marian's classroom experience is one of nurturing creativity and its ability. This focus requires intention, direction, and a continuous connection with herself and with her students. Hart (1998) also describes the importance of trust within the creative process. Only through trust will knowing and learning take place. Fundamentally, most students “know” and “think,” but to practice ethically, they must critically think about “how” they know and this critical analysis begins with introspection. To open up to such a process requires deep trust in the instructor, other students, and in the life process in general. In the previously discussed example, students learned to trust that the classroom was a

safe experience and that the purpose of every reading, task, and assignment was to help them work toward becoming a more effective and ethical practitioner, not to judge them on the “rightness” or “wrongness” of their learning experience.

After students learned to trust other students, the instructor, and their life experiences, the next step in the learning experience was “letting go.” Both the instructor and the student had to allow the “letting go” of the normal classroom regulations, fostering an atmosphere of genuine discussion, introspection, critical analysis, and open two-way communication. It is ironic that we must actively make an effort to “let go.” In the example provided above, many students found it difficult to talk openly about plagiarism because plagiarism was so widespread on the campus at that time. Students explained that that they themselves had probably committed a form of plagiarism in their academic careers but had been fortunate because they had not been caught. Moving past this feeling of guilt and into genuine discussion and introspection often led to an honest discussion on lack of writing skills, lack of interest in subject matter, lack of concern over being caught and found guilty, and lack of concern about long-term ramifications of plagiarism and their academic careers. On a positive note, discussions usually progressed toward the perspective of the instructor on the subject. Students were able to identify feelings of anger, disrespect, frustration, and disappointment from the instructor’s perspective. This letting go and thinking like an instructor often empowered students to see the issue from two perspectives, and provided an “aha” moment for many. This discovery, though, is only encouraged through a safe and trusting environment in which both instructor and student work toward authentic and open discussion.

Student Feedback

Students hesitated originally when asked to explain reasons for term paper plagiarism. Students explained that if they were able to answer the question, then the instructor might assume they had plagiarized on a paper in the past and therefore knew how to do it, get away with it, and attempt it in this course. They also explained that they did not want me to think poorly of them on the first day of class. Most students found the idea of discussing plagiarism a very daunting task. Students explained that they had actually known other students who had been found guilty of term paper plagiarism and felt sorry for them. However, after the completion of these assignments, most students reported being less sympathetic toward the student and more empathetic toward the instructor.

Initial discomfort about the topic was voiced in a number of ways. Reasons for the discomfort included “jinxing themselves” when talking about being caught plagiarizing and openly admitting to other classmates a lack of understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. In most cases, this initial apprehension gave way to a more positive perspective on the topic as soon as the assignment began. After the first few minutes, students reported understanding some of the frustration felt by academicians in cases of plagiarism. Students also reported that the class discussion after the review of the *Code of Ethics* helped solidify their knowledge base on ethical standards and their applicable situations. Students also clarified other discussion topics that focused on disclosure, judging versus non-judging, learning from past mistakes, and values and ethics, both personally and professionally helped them understand the direction of the profession, why we have the *Code*, and how we are to interact with our clients. Students also enjoyed the responsibility of becoming an “ethical delegate” during this course, explaining that it personalized their learning experiences, encouraged them to think outside the box, and increased their understanding of the ethics resolution process. They were able to explain that, if in the beginning of their academic career they had been introduced to the concept of becoming an ethical delegate, they may have taken their studies more seriously and applied themselves more actively in the classroom.

At the conclusion of the semester, most students emerged with a positive view of the experience. Some found the ethics exercise difficult and challenging. A few, having already been found guilty of plagiarism on term papers, simply agonized with it, explaining that the exercise almost made them relive the event. Most students reported that they felt the exercise was important to do for them to really “get into” talking about ethics. Many also reported that they never have looked at plagiarism through the eyes of their instructors. Students also remembered and wrote about this exercise on student evaluations, pointing out that it was an invaluable exercise that contributed to their understanding of ethical dilemmas and resolution.

It does seem that the ethics exercise and subsequent discussion encouraged independent thinking and taking an active approach to learning in the classroom. From an instructor perspective, this exercise provided invaluable feedback on reasons for student plagiarism, what they are thinking, and their personal reactions to the event. The downside, of course, was the extra workload that came during the next class session, as students requested a mini lecture on avoiding plagiarism. More importantly though, it provided an opportunity to observe social work student

majors responding to ethical decision making. This observation also allowed the instructor to determine if those majors possessed critical thinking skills to resolve ethical dilemmas as well as examine their attitude regarding the event. In the past three years, since incorporating this exercise, roughly four social work majors out of 60 have exhibited apathy for the plagiarizing student, suggesting no review of the *NASW Code*, no follow-up discussion with the student, solely immediate expulsion from the University. Twelve majors out of 60 also explained that plagiarism was “really no big deal” and that no action of any type should be taken.

Conclusion

There are those who question the need for professional ethics. Some argue that common sense or practice wisdom is all a social worker needs to make the “right” decision, even when facing the most complicated dilemma. The importance of common sense and practice wisdom should not be underrated, but every social worker can recall times when these were not enough. Despite the fact that many social workers face ethical problems daily, many are unable or unwilling to think through the ethical issue critically or creatively. Anyone who has practiced social work knows that social workers do not have time for drawn-out theoretical debates. Ethical decisions, though, need not take a long time. Because we have so little time, social workers need help in making correct, informed, and educated choices. Similarly, every social worker knows that each case is unique and different, but that there are important commonalities. For them and for others, a code of ethics provides a helpful guideline for arriving at ethical resolution.

Davies (2000) explored teacher-student influences within the classroom and found that teachers influence students more with their behavior than by anything else. Social work practitioners are taught to “start where the client is.” Academicians are taught to “start where the student is.” The use of ineffective instructional methods that lack inspiration, creativity, and motivation are an injustice not only to the profession, but also to higher education, and the populations that we serve. It is Marian's charge, as a social work academician, to provide a learning environment for students that engages their creativity as well as their analytical abilities. Within her classroom, students were challenged to let go, learn, and find creative ways to assist populations-at-risk as well resolve ethical dilemmas. Most of these students did thrive in this learning environment, because they were exploring themselves as both competent practitioners and ethical delegates. The term “ethical delegate” was chosen to use in this course, because social workers are indeed delegates for ethical practice with children, women, families, men, teenagers,

elderly, single mothers, single fathers, widowers, the disabled, the meek, and other struggling populations. Students also seem to like this term and have no problem explaining what it is to other students on our campus. The term belongs to them, and as such, they feel responsible in living up to its expectations.

Through the provision of a safe, creative, learning environment in which students are able to explore ethical issues without fear of criticism or legal and professional penalty, our hope is to cultivate a more educated and informed student, a more compassionate practitioner, a more zealous advocate, and a more ethical humanitarian. Anything less is unethical.

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