Engaging Students’ Pre-existing Skills as an Element of the Competency-Focused Practice Class

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As social work transitions to competency-based education, educators must shift focus to applied knowledge and skill development (Duffy, 2009). The shift to applied, rather than acquired knowledge, involves observing student skill application, educators assessing the skill performance, and providing feedback to guide skill adjustment and ongoing competency development (Swing, 2010). Ideally, the cycle of application, observation, assessment, feedback and adjustment is repeated for every competency multiple times (Albanese, Mejicano, Anderson & Gruppen, 2010; Miller, Todahl & Platt, 2010).

The intense focus on observing and providing feedback to students, requires educators to engage with students based on the skills that students bring to the practice class concurrent with the skills they must achieve (Albanese, Mejicano, Anderson & Gruppen, 2010). The dual educational focus represents a significant shift given that traditional knowledge based learning pays little attention to existing skill sets.

Pre-existing skill sets, if ignored, can interfere with competency development. All students enter practice classes with pre-existing skills. When discussions focus on the interpersonal skills of practice, many students reflect on their pre-existing skills and assume that their competency levels are adequate rather than understanding the subtleties of professional skill applications (Caldarella & Merrell, 1997). Consequently, many students have unrealistic levels of confidence about their ability to use professional skills at the beginning of their education (Holden et al., 2008).
In the shift to competency-based teaching, educators become acquainted with students’ habitual patterns of responding (Albanese, Mejicano, Anderson & Gruppen, 2010). These pre-existing skills become the foundation that can be refined to develop professional competencies. To begin the process of skill refinement, it is important to understand the evolution of preexisting skills. Many interpersonal habits evolve from socialized messages about politeness and rudeness (Denham, 2007; Laible & Thompson, 2007; Nelson, Al Batal & El Bakary, 2002).

While students may be confident in their abilities, research identifies a need for professional-level interpersonal skills as practitioners attend to client communication (Hilsenroth & Cromer, 2007), motivate change (Ryan & Deci, 2008), and maintain focused change efforts (Berliner, 2005). Through evaluation and feedback at each level of the educational sequence, instructors create iterative changes in student skills gradually increasing competence (Albanese, Mejicano, Anderson & Gruppen, 2010).

While educational programs promote new skills, graduates have a tendency to rely on their habitual methods of performing rather than consciously applying their professional learning (Welch & Dawson, 2005). It is consequently important to help students distinguish their socialized (habitual) skills from professional-level skills. If students can identify each skill-set as divergent, a foundation emerges that can allow them to understand which skills-set is being applied in a given situation. This process begins with helping students identify and control their interactive habits.

The inclusion of preexisting skill-sets in the educational experience requires practice faculty to begin where their students “are at” just as students must begin where their clients “are at” experience (Albanese et al., 2010). This relationship extends the traditional depth of the learning alliance. In competency-based professional education with entry level students, findings
indicate that educators with expertise in facilitating learning yield better outcomes than those with content expertise (Peets et al., 2010).

In the professional, competence-based education learning experiences must include challenges to participant’s current skill sets to expand their competency levels (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). This requires instructors to provide feedback on skill performances. Effective feedback is repeatedly found to be a critical contributor to professional competence development (Bing-You & Trowbridge, 2009). Competence-related feedback involves an objective comparison between a student’s skill performance and an accepted performance standard (van de Ridder, Stokking, McGaghie & ten Cate, 2008).

This paper begins the identification of generalist practice beginning skill-sets commonly found in foundation students. As skill-sets are identified, socialization-based discussions provide links to probably early experiences that underpin the original skill patterns. Through understanding these patterns, social work educators can help students understand their initial skills as they seek to build, and differentiate, their professional skills developed through their educational program.

Methods

This paper is based on the findings from 15 years of competence-based practice class observations. The observations were conducted by several instructors all using the same methodology in the classroom to help students identify their current skill patterns and establish a set of professional skills. The practice classes covered three generalist practice courses in the BSW and MSW curriculum. The first course was an introductory practice course covering basic skills as applied in primarily a micro context. The second course focuses on family-level practice and the final, group-level intervention.
Sample
This paper is based on the observations of 2,180 individual practice, 744 family practice, and 876 group practice video tapes. The videotapes were part of a competency-based practice sequence of classes. In each course students were required to videotape role plays which were then viewed and discussed with the students. The sample included 976 BSW students and 672 MSW students viewed over a 14 year period. The racial contribution of the student samples are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Ethnic Composition of the BSW and MSW Cohorts

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<tr>
<th>Initial Practice Course</th>
<th>BSW (N=396)</th>
<th>MSW (N=278)</th>
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<td>Other Ethnic Groups</td>
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<table>
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<th>BSW (N=420)</th>
<th>MSW (N=152)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Count</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Ethnic Groups</td>
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While all of the students were required to videotape their role plays, the frequency of taping varied across the courses due to the course structures. The introductory practice class viewed 6-7 videos while students in the family practice and group classes watched 3-4 videotaped role-plays each. All of the students engaged in standardized role-play scenarios which were observed and critiqued as part of the practice classes. All role plays used the same role play situations within the class. The role plays and critiques occurred in small groups of 4-8 students depending on the focus of the practice class. Students worked in groups with each student playing the worker in at least one role play. After the role plays were videotaped the instructor joined the group to view and discuss the worker skills and provide constructive feedback.

As the tapes were observed, patterns of responding were evident. The vast majority of students in both the BSW and MSW cohorts displayed almost identical patterns of responding. While these patterns varied from micro to macro courses, there was very little within course variance in the initial skill sets displayed by students. The patterns of early responding and patterns of skill development were tracked in each course providing common skill development pathways among the students. These pathways identified the transition from socialized habitual skillsets to professional competencies.

**Introductory Class Findings**

The introductory classes employed role plays based on a woman from a very abusive background meeting with a support worker because of her potentially violent behavior toward her adolescent daughter. The woman had a difficult history with the agency and was very difficult to engage. There were high levels of emotionality in the woman requiring students to manage her expressions. Students were guided in engagement, exploration, goal directed responding, engaging the client in role plays, and managing threats to the working alliance. During the early role plays (typically the first 3-5 with BSWs and 2-3 with MSWs) six typical patterns emerged.
1. **Disengagement into Thinking.** For more than 95% of the early interaction was typified by a four part pattern: 1) listening to the client, 2) shifting focus to thoughts about the client statement, 3) disengagement to focus on their thoughts, and 4) expressing the thought when the client stopped talking.

2. **Downloading Agendas/Advice.** More than 97% of the students would frequently download agendas about what the client should do. The agendas were often motivated by a desire to “take care” of the client after an expression of emotion or a concern that the client might be at risk of engaging in counterproductive behavior.

3. **Focus Drift.** More than 97% of the students would wait patiently when clients spoke even when the client drifted away from the content appropriate for goal directed work. Students refrained from inserting themselves into the conversation or redirecting the focus back to goal directed content.

4. **Tension Avoidance.** More than 92% of the students avoided direct questions about taboo subjects. Rather they tended to respond based on their thinking about how to rectify the situation. This effectively swept the client’s concerns off the table. Students were very hesitant to ask directly about the incident.

5. **Sharing Conclusions rather than Descriptions.** When clients used nonverbal communication more than 98% of the students used conclusions (You are upset) rather than describing their observations (I noticed you became louder as you shared that part of the story).

6. **Fixing the Situation.** Most students (93%), attempted to diminish, rather than explore, emotionally charged situations. This was most pronounced when the client expressed anger or was confrontational with the worker.

The above socialized patterns all emerged with striking consistency throughout the videotaped role-plays. Students were equally consistent in their ability to identify specific socialized patterns and begin reshaping their responses. Framing the initial skillsets as socialized habits was consistently helpful in avoiding emotional reactivity in the students. As they noticed that almost all students were engaging in identical patterns of responding it could be normalized freeing up students to learn rather than feel criticized. After students identified the habitual nature of their responding, they could begin to take control and reshape their responses into professional skills. The reshaping process tended to follow an identifiable pattern of growth. This pattern included the following five phases:

1. Oblivious to the pattern. Initially students were totally unaware of the socialized habit.
2. Aware of habit enactment. After the patterns were identified through videotape analysis, students became aware when they were responding out of habit.
3. Habit interruption. With time, all students were next able to interrupt the habit as it emerged during a role-play.
4. Introduction of alternatives. After being able to interrupt the habit, students developed the ability to identify situations that would elicit the patterned response and awkwardly use alternative skills.
5. New habit development. Through practicing the alternative skills, the students were able to develop new patterns of responding that were more consistent with strong practice responses.
The development of the professional skills was at times frustrating for students. Even when they cognitively knew the skills, they would often revert to their habitual interactions. As they advanced their skill development they were able to differentiate which skill-set they were using when asked to reflect. The differentiation appeared to increase control. More than 70% of the students would report moments between classes where they had used their new skills.

Family Class Findings

The family-focused classes adopted a different structure because they were scheduled in a three-hour block rather than having dedicated time for video-labs. Consequently, class time was adapted to allow for videotaping and viewing. The class-time adopted a similar pattern using deliberate practice principles. Students engaged in reading, a written exercise, and skill-focused discussions prior to videotaping the role-plays. In the family classes four different role plays were used with each group of 4-6 students.

As in the introductory class, initial skill patterns emerged that interfered with the professional level skills. The patterns were all clearly recognizable and attributable to socialization experiences. Initially, no students were aware of the patterns, they were all interactive sequences that occurred outside of conscious thought but most students could verbalize internal injunctions that supported the interactive pattern. Five interactive patterns emerged for the vast majority of the students.

1. **Turn-taking.** Turn taking behavior appeared to interfere with student attempts to use circular questioning as more than 94% of the students would ask a family member a question. After they answered the student would then focus on the next person and invite them to comment on the last person’s statement. There were no attempts to build on the first statement before moving to the next person.

2. **Promoting Reactivity.** After More than 95% of the students would ask another family member to respond soliciting how they felt about the last statement or how their perspective differed. This often led to reactive comments and counter-attacks where the last person who spoke became the focus rather than exploring the situation.
3. **Behavioral Content Focus.** In 96% of the role-plays, the students focused primarily on family’s behaviors and interactions instead of on the family’s emotional experiences and perceptions. Students very early asked questions about the family problem behaviors setting a stage for defensive reactions and counter allegations.

4. **Hesitation.** More than 88% of the students waited while family members spoke and did not interrupt or block the family member when they started a series of attacking or defensive statements. Such politeness allowed the family’s defensive patterns to emerge during the role-play thus causing a decrease in the positive energy.

5. **Arbitration.** As discussions ensued in the role-plays, 96% of the students adopted an arbitrator position where they took control of the conversation, stated what the problem appeared to be, and then proposed the solution. They would then attempt to convince the family members to adopt the solution.

Some of the content and turn-taking patterns appeared to emerge from politeness socialization. In discussion, students spoke of internalized injunctions preventing them from interrupting and ensuring that every family member had equal amounts of time to share their story. The politeness injunctions promoted passivity which allowed the family members to engage in arguing and blaming. The arbitration pattern seemed more strongly associated with authority figure modeling (parents, teachers, supervisors) where the authority figure would ask combatants to state their case and then impose a solution. In discussion, students playing the worker shared a belief that they had the sole responsibility for finding a solution.

The learning sequence was difficult for many students. First, students had to interrupt their socialized impulse to quickly move around the circle inviting each to comment on the other. As they slowed down their transitions from person-to-person they then needed to shift their focus from behaviors and interactions to identify values, feelings and other content that could support common ground. Finally, the students adjusted their invitation to the next family member to avoid asking each to comment on the other person. Rather, they needed to invite members to build on, and share the values or emotional experiences. This was the most difficult transition
Group Class Findings

The group work classes were scheduled in 3 hour blocks similar to the family classes however the structure of the labs was different. The content allowed for labs to be scheduled every other week throughout the semester resulting in a slightly less rushed learning experience. Lab groups were between 6 and 8 students with an ongoing group simulation based on people experiencing separation and divorce. Students played the same group member each week and received weekly updates on the lives of the members. Dynamics were written into the role plays to create tensions among the members that promoted stage appropriate learning.

Students struggled with group work skills and universally failed to activate the group members in the first role play. It was evident that students received very little socialization in how to influence group dynamics. Core skills seemed to emerge from middle school experiences where students learned how to survive peer groups. These influenced combined with authority figure injunctions to provide initial skill-sets that interfered with group leadership skill development. Six common themes emerged in the group class videotapes.

1. **Dyadic Preference.** A pronounced pattern of responding emerged as 97% of the students tended to establish dyadic connections with members in the larger system. As a member spoke the student maintained eye contact with the member who was speaking. As the student focused on the individual member others in the system often were disengaged. Workers could not move to a position of scanning the group, consequently they failed to notice the other member reactions and remained totally focused on the member who was speaking.

2. **Eye-Locked.** Scanning the group was difficult because 99% of the students maintained eye-contact with the person who was talking. They also tended to lock eyes with one or two people when they were talking. The eye-lock prevented scanning and reinforced the dyadic dynamics in the role plays.

3. **Circle Time.** Associated with the dyadic preference, 96% of the students started groups with serial individual conversations as each member of the group took a turn sharing information. At the end of each statement the worker thanked, or otherwise affirmed the person, then the focus shifted to the next person in order. Often group members disengaged resulting in an awkward silence after the group had finished.

4. **Worker Dependent.** Videotape reviews found that 85% of the students struggled with relinquishing control. The dominant pattern involved students setting themselves up as a
pivot point in the shared discussion. When a group member finished speaking, students playing the leader replied directly rather than waiting for the group members to respond. This pattern resulted in all conversation being directed through the student who role-played the leader.

5. **Directive-Avoidant.** More than 97% of the students used questions when attempting to activate the group. As a result, group members responded directly to the worker rather than talking with other members. Students almost never used directives even though they were discussed and modeled in class.

6. **Content-Focus.** Initial group discussions tended to be content focused. More than 95% of the students picked up on content yet never addressed interpersonal dynamics, nonverbal communication, and indicators of emotion. Even when people were clearly upset, students preferred to talk about the situation rather than the more vulnerable elements.

Some of the initial skill patterns appeared associated with authority-figure (politeness) socialization and some emerged from peer-group socialization. The socialization influences were very strong largely because there are no natural developmental experiences that promote good group work skills. Rather, many skills, such as giving directives, are dissuaded by social experience. As a result, questions appeared to be the most comfortable way to gain a response from group members. Many students felt uncomfortable directing group members to talk to each other because it was either unnatural or because they didn’t want to be bossy.

Authority figure socialization influences often contained themes of politeness. The eye-contact injunctions all were attributed to parents telling students to look at them when they were talking. As instructors identified the pattern the students would talk about the need to look at people when they spoke. Students reported that it felt uncomfortable and rude to scan the group with their eyes when another person was talking. Turn-taking patterns were attributed to additional politeness socialization as students worked very hard to ensure all people had equal time and opportunities. The circular pattern was well engrained beginning in preschool and continuing into social work classes.
Peer group socialization (although most dynamics were also reinforced by families) tended to influence the dyadic preferences, content focus, and avoiding directives. When groups became active many students tended to respond similar to peer group exchanges highly content focused and almost appearing like gossip. As the students moved to a scanning position vis-à-vis the group, some of the peer-level behaviors diminished and the students could begin to observe the group-level dynamics.

Because there are few group-level socialization experiences students appear to be very responsive to feedback in the group practice classes. The first challenge is letting go of their control. If students are able to extract themselves from the center of the group operations and achieve the scanning position they quickly begin to develop early group work skills. The next challenge is helping students to intervene without taking over the group. Timing entry is sometimes a point of struggle as students often intervene either too early or too late.

As students gain the timing of entry, they then must find methods of extracting themselves from the center of the group discussion. Once again, learning how to use directives can support students in developing extraction strategies. It typically takes about 4 role-plays with viewing and feedback for students to successfully shift from scanning to active intervention and back to the scanning position.

**Promoting Competency Development**

The educational challenge in helping students develop practice competencies lies in the fact that most students are oblivious to their interactive habits. These traits emerge from socialization experiences and serve as a default setting that governs their responses. As such, these behaviors are instrumental in promoting their social success which indicates years of
practice and integration. Consequently, the first stage of competency development is blissful ignorance.

Helping students to transition from a position of happy confidence to challenging their socialized habits can be difficult because students do not welcome our identification of habits. Most students are incredulous that they have such habits. The fact that the simulations and role plays occur in groups allows for camaraderie and support as students begin to learn about their habits. As students begin to identify the emergence of habits others help them identify and understand the power of their default settings by sharing their own stories of discovery.

The instructor role during this stage is critical. While the instructor is instrumental in helping students identify their habits, the instructor is also critical in helping the student find a growth-oriented interpretation of their responses. Many students interpret feedback as identifying mistakes and respond defensively rather than identifying growth needs. If students believe that the habit is a mistake their corrective work will be shrouded in negative emotions. It is helpful to frame the habitual responses as signs that they are well socialized. This allows the instructor to begin distinguishing between the personal (socialized) and professional self.

The discovery stage is often followed by a period of frustration as students begin to discover just how automatic their habits have become. Typically, this period involves discovering the emergence of the habit after they have already participated in a habitual response. During this period they will often stop after the response and berate themselves. The group and instructor are important supports helping each student to understand how interpersonal habits have a long history.

Eventually, students will be able to interrupt the emergence of their habitual responses. Initially these moments promote awkwardness because subsequent responses are often uncharted
territory. It is important to help students identify their progress at this point and identify their response options to follow up the interruption. The group dynamic tends to change during this stage because some students will remain controlled by their habits and others will be wrestling control back from the automatic responses. Instructors often need to individualize growth curves at this point and help all students shift focus to their own progress.

Students ultimately begin to develop new patterns of responding. At this time they will regain a sense of efficacy and will begin to integrate new, professional, habits. As instructors see students gaining mastery an opportunity arises to help them revisit their developmental sequence to identify the steps it takes to identify and gain control over their habitual responses. Gaining perspective on the process is helpful for establishing a pattern of life-long learning. As students understand how they gain their professional competencies, they become better equipped for new challenges.

References


