Research literature review on social work education instructional methods: 1998-2008.

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This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in

Abstract:

This article presents a review of research studies examining instructional methods reported in the social work education literature published between 1998 and 2008. From a sample of 91 studies, 31 were identified as having used either a single group pre/post test design or a comparison of two or more groups and inclusion of a learning outcome measure. Most of the studies were deficient in either the employment of comparison groups, pre/post designs, utilization of multiple learning outcome measures, or a clear delineation of the connection between teaching methods and learning outcomes. Very few studies were based on previous work. A challenge is made to the field to conduct better designed studies and several suggestions for doing so are offered.

Keywords: social work education | instructional methods | teaching social work students | research of teaching | evaluation of teaching methods | social work education

Article:

INTRODUCTION

Social work education has undergone tremendous changes in the past two decades as a result of several factors. First and foremost, advances in technology have influenced how course material and practice skills are being taught (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008). Technology has influenced not only the instructional methods being used, but also the location and context of the classroom setting. As a result, new instructional approaches have allowed for a wider variety of teaching environments, supplementing or even replacing the traditional classroom with Web-assisted instruction, distance-learning centers, and even home-based learning. In addition, a new generation of students has entered professional social work education. These students represent a generation raised with ever-present computers and, as a result, they have experienced a wider variety of teaching instruction experiences early on in their education.

Enrollment in social work education also has experienced significant growth in this country since the mid-1980s and thus, we are teaching more students (Council on Social Work Educations, 2007). In fact, between 1985 and 2001, there was a 23% increase in new baccalaureate programs,

a 70% increase in graduate programs, and a 40% increase in doctoral programs (Karger & Stoesz, 2003). At the same time, social work education, along with other disciplines in higher education, is under increasing pressure to demonstrate that students' acquisition of knowledge and skills can be measured and validated by the time they graduate (Cournoyer, 2001).

There has been considerable research conducted on specific instructional methods used in social work education (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003; Hurd, 1998; Steiner, Brzuzy, Gerdes, & Hurdle, 2003), teaching approaches used for particular course content areas (Scheyett & Kim, 2004), and various learning environments used (Coe & Elliott, 1999; Faux & Black-Hughes, 2000). As an example, from their literature review of Web-based learning environments for distance education, Coe Regan and Youn (2008) identified three major themes: the increased use of technologies in teaching clinical skills in Web-based environments, the ongoing debate as to the effectiveness and practicality of Web-based leaning environments for teaching clinical skills, and the need to develop a coherent body of knowledge to support the teaching of clinical skills via Web-based learning environments. Yet, it has been more than 20 years since a comprehensive review of the social work instructional methods literature has been conducted. That review, conducted by Sowers-Hoag and Thyer (1985), examined studies that focused specifically on teaching methods used for social work practice courses. These researchers found that social work educators' use of research designs ranged from extremely weak to relatively robust. In addition, they noted that (a) none of the studies used random assignment of students to groups, (b) the most common outcome measure was collected from a questionnaire, and (c) only one study involved a time-series investigation. Sowers-Hoag and Thyer concluded from their review that future research on teaching methods should include multiple outcome measures, evaluations of students' performance in the field, and more emphasis placed on establishing validity of the criterion measures that are used.

Major changes in classroom teaching methods, increased student population size, and the continuing need to demonstrate learning outcomes necessitate that social work educators know the current state of research on social work instructional methods. For example, what teaching methods are most commonly being studied today? To what degree are these studies using rigorous designs that include comparison/control groups, pre/post designs, and learning outcome measures? Are there gaps in this area of research in terms of educational levels being evaluated—Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or Master of Social Work (MSW)—or course content areas studied (e.g., research, practice, or macro courses)? And, to what degree are these studies being systematically built on one another and related to prior findings? These latter questions formed the basis for this current review. Knowledge of these important aspects of this area of research will identify ways to further this area of study. In addition, an understanding of the gaps in this area of research or areas that require further study will help ensure that future studies address these particular evaluation needs.

The purpose of this article was to present a review of the social work education instructional methods research conducted between 1998 and 2008. In line with the work of Sowers-Hoag and

Thyer (1985), this review targeted the social work education literature to identify (a) the teaching methods most commonly being studied; (b) the degree to which the instructional methods studies are using rigorous designs that include comparison/control groups, pre/post designs, and learning outcome measures; (c) gaps in this area of research in terms of educational levels being evaluated (i.e., BSW or MSW) or course content areas studied (e.g., research, practice, or macro courses); and (d) the extent to which these studies have been systematically built on one another and related to prior findings.

To bring our knowledge of the use and effectiveness of instructional methods up to date, we first conducted a systematic review of studies published between 1998 and 2008 involving investigations of instructional methods used in social work education. This review included studies that involved comparative examinations or descriptions of applied instructional methods. On the basis of this review, we classified the literature into four categories: (a) technology-based teaching methods, (b) service-learning methods, (c) specific teaching approaches such as cooperative learning and role play, and (d) instructional methods across the curriculum. The following presents a summary of the literature we examined in forming these four categories.

Technology-Based Teaching Methods

It is not surprising that one of the most extensive areas of this literature involves studies comparing face-to-face traditional instruction with technology-based teaching methods. For example, a number of studies have examined whether Web assisted or Web-based instruction is equal to or better than traditional instruction (Bergquist, 2005; Coe & Elliott, 1999; Harrington, 1999; Hisle-Gorman & Zuravain, 2006; Kleinpeter, Glezakos, & Potts, 2000). Coe Regan & Youn (2008) found in their literature review that there is still much debate as to the effectiveness of Web-based learning environments for teaching clinical skills and, at the same time, a coherent body of knowledge is needed that supports the use of this instructional setting.

The advent of electronic learning (e-learning) technology has presented challenges to social work faculty in determining the most appropriate ways to either integrate online technology into their courses as a supplement to traditional face-to-face instruction or use it solely (Littlefield & Bertera, 2004). One example of e-learning technology is the online electronic forum. The benefits of online discussions are that they can promote student interaction from a distance, elicit student participation, while covering sensitive or controversial subjects. Web-based instruction may be well suited for integrated learning, because it allows more time for review and reflection on topics. It also allows students to engage in written dialogue with each other regarding shared experiences from the classroom combined with their unique experiences in the field (Bushfield, 2005). Edwards and Huff (2003) studied the use of an electronic forum in a diversity course where most of the students reported favorable evaluations of increased discussions outside class that remained anonymous. However, when Littlefield and Bertera (2004) compared the use of anonymous online dialogs with author-identified dialogs between two groups of social work students taking diversity courses, differences emerged. The group using author-identified dialogs

made more postings throughout the semester and were more likely to provide low- and high-risk dialogs.

Other researchers have examined a wide variety of other studies on the use of technology in social work education. For example, Wood, O'Quin, and Eftink (2004) researched the use of videophone technology with BSW students and found partial support for students' increased inclination to use video technology with their older clients. Frey, Faul, and Yankelov (2003) studied students' perceptions of the use of Web-assisted teaching strategies across an MSW curriculum and found that students reported the most useful to them included posting of grades, posting of detailed assignments, provision of feedback regarding assignments, and e-mail with the instructor.

Findings regarding the comparative advantages of computer assisted instruction versus more conventional methods have been mixed. For example, Freddolino and Sutherland (2000) compared interactive instructional television with live instruction across an MSW curriculum and found that there were no statistically significant differences across sites for two of the four course content areas ("human behavior and the social environment" and "research"). However, in this same study significant differences were identified with policy and practice courses. Similarly, Kleinpeter, Glezakos, and Potts (2005) found the overall teaching effectiveness scores were only slightly higher with an on-campus group than with a distance-education group. In contrast, Thyer and Polk (1997) found MSW students in practice courses exposed to both live and televised instruction evaluated the live instruction component significantly higher.

Service-Learning Teaching Method

Service learning is another instructional strategy that has been the focus of several studies in social work education. Service learning is an experiential learning approach that links theory and practice in a service activity which also provides students the opportunity to address community needs (Kapp, 2006). Williams, King, and Koob (2002) found statistically significant positive results when they examined the effects of an intensive service-learning course on the perceived self-efficacy of MSW students. Wells (2006) found that when a service-learning experience was used as part of a graduate-level statistics course, students reported having more opportunities for applied data analysis and interpretation. Sanders, McFarland, and Bartolli (2003) found that when students participated in cross-cultural service learning, they learned more about clients of lower socioeconomic status and of different ethnicities, while also reporting increased comfort levels in working with these client groups. In addition, Anderson and Harris (2005) compared the integration of social welfare policy into a service-learning course with the same content integrated into undergraduates' practicum experience. Both instructional settings were found to equally help students integrate their knowledge of policy concepts.

Specific Teaching Methods

Several teaching approaches used initially in other higher education disciplines have also been the focus of process evaluations in social work education. Problem-based learning, for example, has been studied with positive results for both graduate social work students (Altshulter & Bosch, 2003) and undergraduates (Coleman, Collins, & Bayllis, 2007). Swanberg, Platt, and Karolich (2004) examined and identified several benefits from the use of cooperative learning with MSW students for both teaching research and increasing their satisfaction with instructional television. Aviles (2002) studied the use of mastery learning with undergraduates in an introductory course and found that 93% of the students rated this instructional strategy as either "quite helpful" or "very helpful" in their learning. This latter instructional approach provides vertical and horizontal curriculum alignment, formative evaluations, feedback and correctives, retesting cycles, and criterion referenced grading (Aviles, 2002). Jones (2005) focused on the case method and found that MSW students who were taught by this approach were able to develop an awareness and appreciation for the mezzo and macro dimensions of assessment and intervention. A study by Hurd (1998) focused on the use of strength-based teaching and found statistically significant differences in BSW students' perception of their professional strengths. Structured controversy has been another approach used with social work students and has been found to help students address topics that involve conflict and controversy such as diversity and developing cultural competence (Steiner et al., 2003).

Coleman, Collins, and Bayllis (2007) suggested that "in social work education it is imperative that educators situate an appropriate balance of knowledge acquisition and synthesis and application of knowledge to practice" (p. 99). Even though role play has frequently been used in practice courses, at both the BSW and MSW levels, the study of this instructional strategy has only recently been the subject of investigation in social work education. Petracchi (1998) was one of the first researchers to study the use of trained actors as simulated clients for graduate students and surfaced many positive benefits. Miller (2004) and Petracchi and Collins (2006) have conducted similar studies with comparable results.

Teaching Methods Across the Curriculum

Researchers have also examined the use instructional methods across the social work curriculum. For example, Mumm (2006) surveyed 70 social work students on instructional techniques most helpful to their learning of practice skills that were used by instructors. Students reported that discussion was the instructional method used most frequently and that was most helpful. Students also reported that modeling was also commonly used as an effective means of skill instruction. In addition, students cited written materials as being frequently used, but it was not considered a particularly helpful means to teach practice skills. Lecturing, process recording, and role play were reported as the least effective ways for teaching practice skills. Black and Rice (1996) studied MSW students' perceptions of a range of teaching methods as they assisted in the attainment of 12 learning goals. Weekly seminar instruction was viewed by students in this study as being the most effective in achieving their learning goals followed by classes where there was close contact with the instructor.

The findings of this review suggested that a more focused review relating to studies that included a test of the effectiveness of specific instructional methods was warranted. The following methodology and results are related to this review.

METHODOLOGY

Research studies included in this review were published between 1998 and 2008 in social work journals selected for their emphasis on social work instruction. Specifically studies included in the review met the following criteria:

1 Published between January 1998 and December 2008.

2 Conducted on courses at the BSW level only, the MSW level only, and/or both the BSW and MSW levels.

3 Involved a comparative research strategy with either a single pre/post test design or a comparison (pre/post or post only) of two or more groups.

4 Included at least one student learning outcome measure.

Studies included in this review were identified via database searches using social work abstracts and ERIC educational research. On the basis of an initial identification process, it was determined that the majority of studies on social work instruction have been published in the following journals:

- Arete
- Advances in Social Work
- Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work
- Journal of Community Practice
- Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare
- Journal of Social Work in Education
- Journal of Teaching in Social Work
- Journal of Technology in Human Services
- Research on Social Work Practice

In addition to a keyword search of these journals, we conducted a review of the tables of content of each issue of each journal from 1998 to 2008. 1 We felt that this two-level review ensured that the majority of research published in the past 10 years on social work education had been identified.

We initially identified a total of 91 studies 2 and of these, we determined that 31 met the inclusion criteria. The process of analysis for inclusion involved review of each article by a team of two faculty members and one graduate student. Consensus was reached on each article as to whether it contained an identifiable comparative research design and included at least one

learning outcome. Studies that focused exclusively on course evaluation or students perceptions of instructional methods were excluded. This review process produced the final list of criterion studies that are the focus of this review.

RESULTS

For purposes of this review, we identified five elements of the studies (see Table 1):

1 educational level (BSW, MSW, or both) of the course

2 instructional methods

3 course content area (e.g., research, social work policy, introduction to social work)

4 research design (e.g., number of groups included, pre/post or post only) and sample size

5 learning outcome measures

Table 1 is omitted from this formatted document.

Educational Level

With respect to course educational level, 20 of the studies focused on MSW courses and 11 on BSW courses.

Instructional Methods

In terms of the instructional methods evaluated, 26 of the 31 studies involved the use of some type of technology-based instruction. Of those studies, 23 compared lecture instruction to a type of technology-based instruction (e.g., distance learning, online instruction). Three studies compared two or more types of technology-based instruction (e.g., Web-based compared with Web-based instruction plus). The remaining five studies compared lecture instruction to a type of teaching method (e.g., service learning, cooperative learning).

Course Content Area

The studies identified for this review covered a wide range of course content areas, with the highest number involving practice courses (n = 11), followed by research or statistics courses (n = 9), policy courses (n = 3), introduction to social work (n = 3), cultural diversity (n = 2), Human Behavior and the Social Environment (n = 2), and courses across the curriculum (n = 1).

Research Design

In terms of research designs, 21 of the 31 studies used a one-, two-, or three-group post-only design, and the remaining 10 studies used a pre/post design; only 1 study included a 90-day follow-up.

Learning Outcome Measures

The distribution of learning outcome measures included content area exams (n = 17), satisfaction surveys (n = 3), standardized scales (n = 5), course grades (n = 10), and assignment grades (n = 4). Only three studies involved an outside rater or evaluator (focus group), which addresses the instructor bias that can be an influencing variable with other learning outcome measures (e.g., course grades, assignment grades). In addition, only 2 of the 31 studies used a learning outcome measure that had validity established on the instrument.

DISCUSSION

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DISCUSSION

The purpose of this review was to provide an assessment of what the field of social work education is doing with regard to determining the effectiveness of its instruction. Toward this end a set of selection criteria was identified and used to identify research studies that examined social work instructional methods between 1998 and 2008. One primary aim of this review was to determine whether the body of work in this area of inquiry had progressed in terms of its use of more rigorous experimental design, advanced data-collection methodologies, and expanded measurement of learning outcomes since the Sowers-Hoag and Thyer (1985) review. This review was conducted with an emphasis on identifying studies that used a research strategy with either a single pre/post test design or a comparison of two or more groups along with inclusion of a learning outcome measure.

Teaching Methods

In examining both the 31 studies that met the inclusion criteria and the 60 studies that did not, the majority of studies focused on a comparison of some type of technology-based instruction with a traditional face-to-face (classroom lecture) approach. This is not a surprising finding, particularly with the increased use of technology in the classroom over the past 10 years. It also indicates that about half (n = 46) of the 91 studies reported assessments of these new teaching methods. This emphasis on studies of technology instruction versus traditional instructional approaches also may be indicative of the relative ease and availability to set up such research comparisons.

Only 2 of the 31 criterion studies involved an examination of a teaching method across several courses in the social work curriculum. Of the nonincluded studies from the review pool, an

additional five involved investigations including more than one course. Studies that examine instructional methods across the curriculum may be more challenging to set up and conduct by research faculty in many social work programs.

Use of Rigorous Designs

The finding that approximately one third (n = 31) of the 91 studies met the inclusion criteria for this review means that most of the research on social work education methods has either not involved single group pre/post designs or comparison/control groups and/or have not included learning outcome measures. In fact, many of the research designs used in the 31 criterion studies identified for this review were limited; none of the designs involved random assignment of students to groups, few used comparison groups, and only one design included a follow-up study that evaluated maintenance of knowledge and skill growth. In addition, only two studies used a learning outcome measure that had validity established on the instrument. Related to these findings, of the 60 studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria, more than two thirds (n = 43) involved the use of a single group design, and more than half of these studies (n = 29) involved a post-only scale administration.

Gaps in This Area of Research

There appears to be more well-designed studies directed at instructional methods at the MSW level (n = 20) than at the BSW level (n = 11). This suggest a need for more rigorously designed studies at the BSW level as well as examination of instructional methods between undergraduate and graduate students.

Of the 31 criterion studies, most involved either practice (n = 11) or research (n = 9) courses. This pattern also was true of the 60 studies that failed to meet all of the review inclusion criteria (35 practice courses, 25 research/statistics courses). What is particularly surprising of all the studies conducted on cultural diversity courses, a content area emphasized in recent years in most BSW and MSW curriculums, only two were identified as meeting this study's inclusion criteria. These courses typically generate strong emotional reactions along with uncomfortable discussions which would seem to warrant the need for further investigation.

Extent to Which the Research Has Been Extensions of Previous Work

With the exception of studies published by the same author(s), very few of the studies appeared to be replications or refinements of previous work. Examination of the studies' reference lists revealed almost no cross referencing of any of the studies included in the total 91 studies reviewed. As a result, there appears to be limited critical examination of related studies, which has likely affected the development of our knowledge base relating to social work instructional methods and indicates cautious use of the results identified.

Limitations

Although our intent was to be comprehensive in our review of the literature, several limitations need to be noted. One was that primary means of identifying the journals from which the studies were drawn were identified using the databases of social work abstracts and ERIC. It is possible that some relevant studies not published in our target list of journals were not included. Also, as noted, because of limitations of what was available through the university's library, pre-2000 issues of two journals were not available for review.

Implications

Sowers-Hoag and Thyer's (1985) meta-review of social work practice education offered several suggestions for improving research on this area of study. Their suggestions included providing clearer descriptions of instructional methods, describing the method of subject assignment to groups, replicating of studies, establishing validity on evaluation measures, using multiple evaluation measures, and evaluating the generalization of skills to practice. The present review indicates that few of these suggestions have been incorporated into the studies conducted on this area of research in the past 10 years. One exception was the recommendation to use multiple learning outcome measures—17 of the 31 criterion studies included multiple measures. However, the measures used did not clearly connect instructional methods to learning outcomes. In most of these studies, there continues to be a lack of emphasis on using or establishing validity on the learning outcome measures.

Sowers-Hoag and Thyer (1985) called for "technological descriptions of educational interventions in enough detail for readers to replicate study methods, or cite the primary sources of such information" (p. 13). This was not provided in many of the studies included in this review. In the course of the present study, the researchers repeatedly encountered difficulty in finding clear delineations of the teaching methods being examined. Further clarification of instructional methods being evaluated in these studies will allow for more replication of studies.

Another suggestion made by Sowers-Hoag and Thyer (1985) was for researchers to look closely into the practice setting "to determine the extent that students generalize and maintain practice skills beyond the classroom setting" (p. 13). Only one study included in this review involved a follow-up evaluation. There continues to be a lack of studies evaluating students' generalization of skills to the practice setting.

There are a number of possible reasons why the level of rigor of this research has not progressed further in the past two decades. First, the study of instructional methods involves an examination of a number of complex variables including the teaching method, composition of students in class, learning styles of students, course content area, and teaching skills of the instructor, which make these studies more challenging to design. Second, effectively evaluating these latter variables may also require the inclusion of qualitative sources of data in the research deigns. However, these evaluation methods typically are more time consuming and often require more resources (e.g., research assistants). Third, often junior faculty members are not provided the

same level of respect for this area of research and thus may not be given the support and resources they need to conduct more rigorously designed studies. Fourth, faculty members typically find fewer sources of external funding to conduct these studies in comparison with other areas of research. Fifth, the lack of standardized learning outcome scales, with established levels of reliability and validity, adds to the difficulty of conducting better designed research in this area of study.

Future Directions

On the basis of this review, we conclude that there is a need for more rigorous investigations that include comparison groups, pre/post designs, use of multiple measures, and greater delineation of the connection between teaching methods and learning outcomes. Along with the application of more experimental/methodological rigor, other refinements needed in this area of study include operational definitions of the instructional methods used in order to more clearly demonstrate their connection to learning outcomes. Operational definitions of the instructional method(s) used would improve interpretation of findings and facilitate replication of studies. Further, more studies that evaluate course content with different instructional methods are needed in order to identify optimal learning outcomes for various content areas.

Studies that involve assessment of instructional methods over longer periods of time are also needed to identify all influencing variables and the maintenance of knowledge/skill development. To determine the most effective instructional methods for various content areas of the curriculum, instructional methods should be tested over multiple semesters with different classes. These types of studies will allow for parsing out of class demographics, class schedule, and instructional loads that might skew results from a single class taught over one semester. Comparative evaluation of different social work education methods provides the opportunity to examine multiple variables influencing learning outcomes including students' learning styles, teaching experience of instructors, course content, students previous educational and life experiences, teachers' personality, and teaching style.

Social work practitioners should routinely be involved in the evaluation of students' acquisition of skills and knowledge. By including these professionals in the grading of students' cumulative learning of course content areas; social work curricula will be more likely to stay relevant to current practice needs. In addition, the inclusion of practitioners in the grading of students will ensure that knowledge/skills taught in the classroom do in fact generalize to the practice setting.

Multiple outcome measures are needed in this area of research but the question as to what types or combination of measures are most effective for measuring student learning remains unclear. Reliance on performance measures, such as grades or course assessments, may not accurately or completely assess a student's mastery of course content and ability to meet course objectives (Anaya, 1999). In contrast, student satisfaction surveys and student evaluations of teaching effectiveness are also questionable measures when used alone (Wolfer & Johnson, 2003). Social

work faculty members may want to consider developing cumulative content area exams and/or skill performances (e.g., role plays with standardized clients) that could provide an additional learning outcome measure. Such mastery assessments in various course content areas could provide important feedback regarding skill attainment while increasing collaboration among faculty members.

As advocates of evidence based practice, social work educators must model and demonstrate these same skills through evidenced-based teaching (Lundahl, 2008). In an effort to integrate teaching with research, faculty members should be encouraged to refine their teaching skills by using the classroom as a fertile ground for research. Junior faculty members should be supported in their efforts to study their teaching as part of their research program. The importance and respect given to this area of study must be promoted among social work faculty to truly establish evidence-based teaching in social work education.

Last, to move forward as a discipline, it is imperative that research on teaching be conducted using methods and processes that meet the standards and rigors of scientific investigation. In doing so, the field can advance its knowledge and understanding on how to improve instructional methods so that students are better prepared for the many challenging roles of the profession.

Notes

1Issue availability for Advances in Social Work was limited to 2000–2008, Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work to 2002–2008, and Arete ceased publication in 2006.

2A bibliography of all reviewed studies is available from the authors.

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