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2016

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### Repository Citation

Kalkbrenner, Michael T. and Horton-Parker, Radha J., "Applying John Dewey's Theory of Education to Infuse Experiential Learning in an Introduction to Human Services Course" (2016). *Counseling & Human Services Faculty Publications*. 20.  
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### Original Publication Citation

Kalkbrenner, M. T., & Horton-Parker, R. J. (2016). Applying John Dewey's Theory of Education to infuse experiential learning in an introduction to human services course. *Journal of Human Services*, 36(1), 65-68.

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## Applying John Dewey's Theory of Education to Infuse Experiential Learning in an Introduction to Human Services Course

Michael T. Kalkbrenner, Radha J. Horton-Parker

### Abstract

Teaching an introductory human services course is challenging, as educators must provide an overview of effective practice in a highly diverse field. Researchers conducted a review of all of the prior editions of the *Journal of Human Services (JHS)* to identify previous research on experiential learning strategies in human services education. This brief note examines the pedagogical practice of experiential learning and the application of John Dewey's theory for successfully training students in an Introduction to Human Services course.

### Introduction

Human Services (HS) professionals are generalists who assume a variety of roles while working with clients in widely diverse settings (Neukrug, 2017). Teaching the Introduction to Human Services course can be challenging, as educators are faced with the task of providing an overview of a diverse field that requires hands-on learning (Haynes, 2005; Neukrug, 2017). Experiential learning has been found to be effective in meaningfully facilitating students' deeper understanding of content in such courses (McAuliffe, 2011). The purpose of this brief report is to provide an overview of how John Dewey's (1933) theory of experiential learning that was used as a theoretical framework to teach the Introduction to Human Services course.

The current researchers first began investigating the breadth of literature about recommendations for implementing experiential learning pedagogy in human services education by conducting a review of all published editions of the *Journal of Human Services (JHS)*, formerly referred to as *Human Services Education*. The purpose of this search was to determine the breadth of existing research related to experiential learning strategies that can be applied in the Introduction to Human Services Course. The researchers found that active learning pedagogy in human services dates back almost 30 years.

The importance of incorporating active learning pedagogy into HS education first appeared in *JHS* with Brittingham and McKinney's (1987) discussion detailing the benefits of infusing active learning strategies into HS education. Researchers emphasized the importance of hands-on classroom activities for preparing students to translate theory into practice (Brittingham & McKinney, 1987). During the following 25 years, a variety of articles about active and experiential learning were published in *JHS* (Desmond & Stahl, 2011; Hagen, 1996; Hagen, 1992). Particular emphasis was placed upon methods and pedagogies for incorporating service learning and cooperative learning into HS education (Desmond & Stahl, 2011; Hagen, 1996; Hagen, 1992). However, there did not appear to be any previous research in *JHS* that specifically addressed a theoretical framework for integrating experiential learning pedagogy into HS education.

John Dewey's theory of education has been referred to as "perhaps the most influential account of learner-engaged, experienced based education" (McAuliffe, 2011, p.15). Dewey hypothesized that the major purpose of education was to facilitate students' development of reflexive thinking in order to promote the betterment of society (Dewey, 1933). When faced with a problem, reflexive thinkers have the cognitive capacity to evaluate the situation from multiple

perspectives and to critically evaluate information (McAuliffe, 2011). Dewey (as cited in McAuliffe, 2011) believed that experiential education was essential, as students develop reflexive thinking skills by engaging in cooperative learning activities which require critical thinking and considering multiple courses of action.

### **Implications for HS: Applying Dewey's Theory in an Introduction to Human Services Course**

John Dewey's theory of experiential learning was utilized as a theoretical framework to teach a 15-week Introduction to Human Services course at a Research-Intensive university. The remainder of this brief report includes an explanation of how the major components of Dewey's theory were utilized as a theoretical framework for teaching the introductory HS course. The course was structured around Dewey's two key notions of Interest & Effort and Receptivity vs. Activity (Dewey, 1897; Dewey, 1933; McAuliffe, 2011).

#### **Interest and Effort**

Dewey believed that students must first be interested in a topic before they will dedicate effort and motivation to the learning process (Dewey, 1897; Dewey, 1933). Based on Dewey's notion of interest and effort, students in the introductory course were assigned a reflection paper that required them to make an active effort to go out into the field and interview a HS practitioner. Students were then given a series of reflection questions to help them process their experience. The reflection questions were designed to trigger students' interest and effort in engaging with the field of human services. For example, students were asked to write about how they believed each of the five situational factors that are outlined by Neukrug (2017), "economic, geographical, health, social, and cultural" (p. 310), had impacted the occupation of the HS professional that they interviewed. This reflection assignment allowed students to actively learn about the field of HS while applying the five situational factors in the field.

#### **Receptivity vs. Activity**

Receptivity in learning is the process by which students passively receive knowledge (McAuliffe, 2011). For example, students passively receive information as they listen to a lengthy lecture. Dewey hypothesized that students learn more effectively and have the most powerful deep learning experiences when they are actively involved in the learning process, as opposed to when they passively receive information (Dewey, 1897; Dewey, 1933). Based on Dewey's notion of receptivity, the instructor of the Introduction to Human Services course included experiential learning activities in each class. For example, students participated in the team teach-back activity during the first day of class. The team teach-back activity involves students collaboratively working in small groups to come up with creative strategies to teach their classmates about a course-related topic (McAuliffe, 2011). Students were divided into small groups where they were randomly assigned to review two of the 13 roles and functions of HS professionals outlined by Neukrug (2017), then teach these two back to the class. This activity effectively facilitated students' active engagement in the course as they first learned new material, and then came up with creative strategies to teach the material to their classmates. For example, one group created a wheel of fortune game where their classmates enthusiastically identified action verbs that were related to the job description of an outreach worker.

Students participated in a variety of different experiential learning activities during each class throughout the remainder of the semester. The experiential activities that were used in each of the 15 modules for this course were adapted from Neukrug's (2017) text, which includes multiple experiential activities for each topic that is covered in the introductory course, including: case scenarios, ethical dilemmas, reflection exercises, and role plays.

### Steps in Experiential Learning

As students' receptivity, interest, and effort are cultivated, Dewey hypothesized that learners progress through the following five conditions or phases of experiential learning: indeterminate situations, intellectualizations, working hypothesis, reasoning, and action (Dewey, 1925; McAuliffe, 2011). Modules in the Introduction to Human Services course were specifically tailored to facilitate students' learning and to promote their curiosity in alignment with each of Dewey's phases of experiential learning.

Consistent with Dewey's theory, in the first stage, students encountered indeterminate situations as they were exposed to vague, unfamiliar tasks or problems that had no single correct answer (Dewey, 1925; McAuliffe, 2011). Every activity required that students reflect on the situation and brainstorm several courses of action before deciding on a resolution. During one class, for example, in small groups students were randomly assigned one of the "ethical and professional vignettes" where they were exposed to scenarios where the best course of action was unclear (Neukrug, 2017, p.25). Students then progressed into the intellectualization stage as they realized that their previous ways of knowing were not sufficient to address the problem. For example, students appeared to begin making the transition from dualistic to relativist ways of thinking as they encountered ethical dilemmas that could not be resolved by their previous schemas. During the intellectualization phase, students began to think about the problem that was posed in the experiential learning activity in new and more complex ways (Dewey, 1925; McAuliffe, 2011). Throughout the activity, students became increasingly comfortable sitting with ambiguity as they accepted the notion that there is often times degrees of uncertainty when seeking the best possible course of action in the context of a case study or ethical dilemma. To help students become comfortable with ambiguity, the instructor encouraged students to have a dialogue about how there were conflicts between the laws, values, and ethics in each scenario.

Students then actively came up with strategies for resolving these ethical dilemmas using the "*Ethical Standards of Human Services Professionals*" (Neukrug, 2017, p. 316). Creating strategies for resolving the ethical dilemma indicated that students had reached Dewey's working hypothesis stage which involves generating potential strategies for addressing a problem or situation (Dewey, 1925). More specifically, students collaboratively brainstormed a variety of possible solutions to ethical dilemmas through verbal dialogue and written reflections. Each group then presented their strategies to the rest of the class. Collaboratively, students entered Dewey's reasoning stage where they brainstormed the consequences of possible courses of action for addressing the problem. Learners entered the final action phase as they implemented or tested their new hypotheses. Through active role plays, students practiced implementing their newly generated solutions to ethical dilemmas. For example, the task in one group's ethical vignette was to decide how to address a situation where a co-worker was making racist and offensive remarks (Neukrug, 2017, p.25). Students practiced role playing a variety of active listening and assertive communication skills as they rotated role-playing the practitioner, co-worker, and observer. After each role play, students processed the effectiveness of the skills that

they practiced. Students began to adopt the perspective that resolving ethical dilemmas was a process rather than a dichotomous competency.

### Recommendations for HS Education & Conclusion

John Dewey's theory of experiential learning was utilized as a theoretical framework for teaching a 15-week Introduction to Human Services course. The results of students' formative and summative course evaluations indicated that the experiential learning activities facilitated a deeper understanding of the course topics. To conclude, the authors recommend that instructors of Introduction to Human Services courses incorporate Dewey's theory into their pedagogies and use texts that include a multitude of experiential activities to promote powerful learning in students. Future research is needed to investigate the implications of using Dewey's theory of experiential learning to teach other HS courses. The implications from the current brief report, however, suggest that Dewey's theory may offer a valuable theoretical framework for infusing experiential learning, and thus resolve the conundrum of how to make an Introduction to Human Services course truly meaningful and relevant to practice.

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