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2016

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Rebecca Thomas

University of Connecticut - West Hartford

Christina M. Chiarelli-Helminiak

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, cchiarelli-helminiak@wcupa.edu

Kyle Barrette

United Nations Development Program

Brunilda Ferraj

Connecticut Community Providers Association

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, R., Chiarelli-Helminiak, C. M., Barrette, K., & Ferraj, B. (2016). Engaging MSW Students in Faculty Research: Students' Perspectives of Involvement in a Program Evaluation. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 1-14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2016.1176981>

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**Engaging MSW Students in Faculty Research:
Students' Perspectives of Involvement in a Program Evaluation**

Rebecca L. Thomas, PhD

Christina M. Chiarelli-Helminiak, MSW

Kyle Barrette, MSW

Brunilda Ferraj, MSW

Author Note

Rebecca L. Thomas, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, University of Connecticut

Christina M. Chiarelli-Helminiak, Assistant Professor, Graduate Social Work Department, West
Chester University

Kyle Barrette, MSW, Consultant, United Nations Development Programme, New York, NY

Brunilda Ferraj, MSW, Senior Public Policy Specialist, Connecticut Community Providers
Association, Rocky Hill, CT

This research was funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services through a National
Leadership Grant.

Correspondence regarding this paper should be addressed to Rebecca Thomas, School of Social
Work, University of Connecticut, Email: rlthomas@uconn.edu

Abstract

Engaging social work students in research is challenging, in part, because of the way research is taught in the classroom and the need for learners to effectively develop connections between the “abstract world” of research concepts with the “real world” of professional experiences. This article describes the experiences of graduate social work students involved in a process and outcome evaluation of a community-based program. Analysis of student learning outcomes and the team-based model used to engage students in the evaluation are provided to put forth a model of teaching social work research through direct, supervised, and collaborative engagement.

Keywords: collaborative learning, experiential learning, implicit curriculum, research education, social work

Engaging MSW Students in Faculty Research:

Students' Perspectives of Involvement in a Program Evaluation

A major barrier to the use and production of social work research is the manner in which educators, students, and practitioners have conceptualized research and its relation to social work practice (Bolin, Lee, Glen Maye, & Yoon, 2012; Grossman, 1980; Secret, Ford, & Lewis-Rompf, 2003). While a limited number of social work students choose research as a principal endeavor, most tend to separate research and practice, perceiving each as having different intents and purposes (Secret et al., 2003). Social work students often view researchers as removed from practice and as producing data and solutions which may not yield practical implementation (Bolin et al., 2012; Grossman, 1980; Rothman, 1977).

Grossman (1980) argued that social work students' resistance to undertaking research rests in the failure to effectively communicate the relationship between research and practice; between the "abstract world" of research concepts and the "real world" of personal experiences. Students who understand the relationship between research and effective practice, and those who believe social work research is important, have higher interest in research and lower research anxiety (Bolin et al., 2012; Maschi & Youdin, 2011). Such evidence underscores the importance of experiences that help students understand the supportive relationship between research and practice and communicate the significance of social work research.

Various approaches to teaching social work research have been deliberated in the literature. According to Harder (2010), research can be taught as a means of solving real world problems related to direct practice. Other techniques focus on acquainting students with the methods of program evaluation research to help them connect research to practice improvements.

According to Grossman (1980), “the net result of staged exposure to the various [evaluation] techniques is that students begin to see that research can be an aid rather than a chore” (p. 38).

This article explores the direct engagement of graduate social work students in faculty research as part of the implicit curriculum. The students were engaged as researchers in a process and outcome evaluation of a community-based immigrant civic engagement program. Reflection papers completed by student research assistants at the end of the evaluation provide insight into student learning and development associated with the project. The article describes the collaborative, team-based model used to facilitate the coordination and management of the program evaluation and how the model contributed to student development.

Literature Review

Social Work Research

Research is critical to the continued development of the social work profession. Current discourse regarding social work research points to the need for researchers and practitioners to move beyond traditional practices of information transfer toward a more appropriate notion of information exchange (Lee & Garvin, 2003) and for practitioners to move beyond being recipients of knowledge to having an active role in knowledge creation (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005).

Researchers provide evidence-based practice to formulate ideas and stimulate thinking. In parallel, social work practitioners are encouraged to integrate practice activities with scientific evidence from evaluation and practice-based research (Fouche & Lunt, 2009). The National Association of Social Workers (2008) charges social work practitioners and researchers to utilize evaluation and research in direct practice and inquiry. Research facilitates accountability of

social work practice, enhances professional skills, enables discussions on best practices, and improves the overall standing of the social work profession (Fouche & Lunt, 2009).

Research -- particularly program evaluation research -- is critical to ensuring that both practitioners and clients views are shared and understood within the profession. Despite differences in work environments and specific tasks, both practitioner and researcher carry the issues of clients as their main concern (Jackson & Feit, 2011).

Program evaluation research

Program evaluation research can be used to understand client experiences of a program or service and its effects or impacts. While findings are often non-generalizable, they can serve as the foundation for future studies using larger, more representative samples.

Acquainting students with the techniques used in program evaluation research helps them realize the direct relationship between research activities and improvements to direct practice. Engaging students directly in evaluation research improves both their understanding and utilization of such techniques within practice (Fisher-Borne, Casstevens, & Hall, 2014; Harder, 2010). Considering the importance of program evaluation in the development of effective and efficient social work programs, there is a clear need to foster the understanding and development of evaluation techniques within social work education.

Implicit Curriculum

Efforts towards engaging social work students in research are numerous and currently compulsory within educational standards for social work education (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; Hostetter, Sullenberger, & Wood, 2013; Hughes, Ortiz, & Horner, 2013; Jacobson & Goheen, 2006). The fourth competency in the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE, 2015) most recent revisions of the Educational Policy (EP) put forth that

students engage in research informed by practice and practice informed by research. Competency 9 furthers students' research engagement through evaluation of client systems at all levels of practice. While the model of teaching and learning research discussed in this article would be difficult to implement within explicit curriculum, we suggest a model aligned with the implicit curriculum embedded within a social work program.

Aligned with the human behavior in the social environment perspective integrated throughout the explicit social work curriculum, the environment in which social work students learn is the implicit social work curriculum. While not a required part of social work education, engaging students in faculty research enhances the implicit curriculum as faculty are able to model professional behaviors of research practice, as suggested in EP 3.2-Faculty (CSWE, 2015). However, few models for teaching research to social work students has involved direct engagement in such practices.

Student Engagement

The research process carries specific relevance to social work students' practice, as many are accepted into MSW programs with previous experience and are in current field placements. Students need to be prepared to assess their own practice, evaluate the effectiveness of agencies and organizations, and study social and structural issues affecting clients. This necessitates effective mechanisms for introducing and engaging social work students in research and program evaluation.

Grossman (1980) noted that students can learn a great deal about research by being involved in one or several levels of research and Rothman (1977) described an approach to teaching social work research in educational settings. In Rothman's model for teaching research, didactic tasks include identifying a practice problem, locating the relevant basic research,

evaluating the findings of such research by reviewing the methodology, and developing a set of practice techniques that can be tested in the field.

Challenges. While some social work students enter their MSW program with a positive view of research, the majority tend to perceive a separation between research and practice and a difference of intents and purposes (Green, Bretzin, Leininger, & Stauffer, 2001; Lazar, 1991). Social work students and practitioners often view researchers as removed from practice, as demanding a level of precision that is impossible in everyday social work practice, and as producing data and solutions which do not lend to practical implementation or problem solving in the field (Grossman, 1980; Rothman, 1977). Tying the two worlds of research and practice has been noted by students and faculty alike as a challenging and taxing process (Uehara, et al., 1996).

Involvement of students in the research process holds the potential to mediate negative perceptions and improve students' engagement with and understanding of research (Dudley, 2011; Holosko, 2006). Rothman (1977) suggested that students who engage in research would naturally come to view research as a method of social work practice, not as a separate field altogether. Direct involvement in the research process supports the ability of students to be more critical and effective consumers of researcher literature, to develop technological skills to use research-based software applications, and to develop collaborative working skills (Jacobsen & Goheen, 2006).

Immigrant Civic Engagement Project and Evaluation

The Institute of Museum and Library Services awarded a public city library a National Leadership Grant to develop and implement a comprehensive program to promote civic engagement among immigrants. The Immigrant Civic Engagement Project focused on two

interconnected goals meant to build social capital through a cultural navigator program and community dialogues (see Author, 2014, for more information regarding the program and evaluation).

The School of Social Work was contracted to conduct a process and outcome evaluation of the project. The principal investigator (PI, Associate Professor of Social Work) formed an evaluation team that included a research coordinator (doctoral candidate in Social Work) and research assistants (Master of Social Work [MSW] students). As a multi-year evaluation, different and successive groups of MSW students took part in the evaluation team resulting in a total of eight research assistants over the course of the three-year grant period. Students were not given course credits for their participation in the evaluation team, but were employed via work-study funds for 10 to 15 hours a week over the duration of the academic year (Author, 2014). The students had various levels of experience, understanding, and interest in research before joining the evaluation team. Prior research experience was not a prerequisite for joining the evaluation team, but students with an interest in immigrant civic engagement were desired.

The program evaluation utilized a mixed-method methodology, with participant observation being the primary mode of data collection. The evaluation team attended 132 project-related meetings and events. Qualitative data was gathered through 65 semi-structured interviews with project staff, community stakeholders, and program participants. Two paper surveys and one online survey were employed to obtain additional qualitative and quantitative information. Rigor of the program evaluation was increased through the use of data triangulation, regular debriefing sessions among the evaluation team members and program administrators, and a well-documented audit trail. Institutional Review Board approval was maintained throughout the duration of the evaluation.

Methodology

At the end of the three year-evaluation, all student researchers were invited via email to respond to 15 questions regarding their experience on the evaluation team. The questions were designed to capture the students' reflections on their role in the evaluation, as a researcher, and how the participation on the evaluation team related to their overall academic experience and future as a social work professional. Four of the student evaluators provided responses to the questions and granted permission to analyze the content of the reflections. Two research team members manually analyzed the responses for themes. Three of the student researchers were engaged in member checking to review the themes for representation of their reflections. The PI and three of the student researchers then collaborated in the writing of this manuscript.

Team-based Evaluation Model

Research has been described as a lonely and emotionally charged process (Reinharz, 1979; Wax, 1971). Students new to the research process have reported fear and anxiety when faced with gathering data in the field and producing scientifically sound results (Adam, Zosky, & Unrau, 2004; Green et al., 2001; Lazar, 1991). Addressing these challenges of engaging students new to the research process, Aram, Morgan, and Esbeck (1971) assert that collaboration and a collaborative research environment can promote psychological well-being, increase confidence in research findings, and reduce academic isolation.

Scholars have suggested that the central component of teaching effective research skills is to guide social work students to think in terms of concepts, context, relationships, and patterns (Glaser, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland, 1971). The objective of engendering such capacities is to support students in drawing on their own implicit knowledge and skills to gather and analyze data. This approach mirrors that of experiential learning models by directly engaging

the learner's experience and using the learner's own meanings to build an understanding of concepts and processes (Boud & Knights, 1996). Thus, students who learn research in an experiential manner will come to view research as a method of social work practice, not as a separate field altogether (Rothman, 1977).

Based on the concepts of the collaborative environment and experiential learning, the evaluation team was designed to facilitate a supportive environment where student researchers could directly experience and engage in the entire research process, from planning to implementation to dissemination of findings. Training, orientation, and observation of student researchers were provided by the PI and research coordinator during their initial stages of involvement with the team and throughout their experience. Student researchers were progressively given more responsibilities commensurate with their development. The team model utilized weekly team meetings to debrief research activities, to provide ongoing feedback mechanisms for student researchers, and to explore new ideas for the project as a non-hierarchical group. The time spent together as a team also encouraged team cohesion and confidence-building among the members.

Students' Reflections

Initial attitudes and orientation

Coming from different experiential backgrounds prior to starting their research position, some students misunderstood the connection between social work practice and research. One student commented, "My feeling at the time was that academic research often remained in an unapproachable vacuum, where it was unable to contribute to social change." Another student reflected, "What I lacked at that time was a clear understanding of the unique nature of social

work research and knowledge of the direct correlation between social work research and practice.”

Student researchers’ expectations of roles and tasks highlighted general attitudes and preconceptions regarding a student’s role in academic research is similar to those reflected in the literature (Bolin et al, 2012, Lazar, 1991). One student noted, “I expected to perform duties such as data entry or conduct literature searches.” Another added, “I expected to be ... transcribing interviews in an office.”

After joining the evaluation team, students noted their preconceptions of research and evaluation quickly shifted to a more positive understanding. One student remarked, “I quickly learned that this project would be different and I would be in the field observing project-related meetings and activities.” Another student reflected, “I was surprised and pleased to see my role within the evaluation team grow ... I accompanied the PI and research coordinator during project-related meetings and observed them as they conducted focus groups and interviews. In time, I assumed responsibility for these duties.”

Student researchers highlighted the importance of initial orientation to the evaluation and support from experienced members of the team as crucial to their shifting attitude towards research and their skill development. One student observed, “It was hugely beneficial to be allowed much time to familiarize myself with the grant and the first year’s work of the evaluation team.” Other students noted the importance of the orientation period in which students’ skills were matched with their roles and tasks. One student stated, “Our supervisor [PI] made a point for us to introduce ourselves and our backgrounds prior to having come to graduate school, communicating each of our unique strengths so that we could discuss how to utilize them for research.”

Collaborative Learning

Recognizing the strengths of the collaborative learning processes, the team structure included regularly scheduled meetings and direct support for research assistants. According to the student researchers, this format provided a framework for mutual learning, and the experiential diversity of the team allowed for multiple avenues of professional development.

Recounting the structure of the evaluation team, one student observed, “Through weekly meetings we discussed how the project was being carried out, new developments within the project, as well as adjustments and improvements we thought could be made. As a team of evaluators, consisting of social work educators, researchers, and students, these meetings allowed our team to discuss and process what we witnessed ... from various perspectives and vantage points.”

Describing the collaborative environment, one student reflected, “These meetings, held on a weekly basis for two hours, paralleling the structure of university classes, allowed me to obtain critical feedback and answers to specific questions regarding the research process. Ultimately, these meetings created a collaborative learning environment that helped me to hone my skills as a researcher and evaluator and offered me the opportunity contribute in a meaningful manner.”

Students also discussed how the collaborative structure of the team was a valuable forum to address issues they experienced during the course of the evaluation. One student recalled, “During my first semester as a student researcher, I struggled with my role as a participant observer. Following a debriefing session, the PI and research coordinator clarified the role of a participant observer and suggested ways in which I could establish and maintain my boundaries as a researcher. It was important to have discussions such as these within a larger group setting,

as one student researcher's experiences would help to inform the others." This example provided a glimpse into the open dialogue and problem solving that occurred through the collaborative learning format.

Students also noted that they were able to work through ideas in real time, improving their skills and learning. One student noted, "Reviewing, clarifying, and debating interview questions during team meetings, with oversight and explanation from more experienced team members, provided a unique and didactic experience that allowed me to improve specific skills and competencies regarding instrument development."

Overall, students conferred the suitability and effectiveness of the collaborative environment in helping to increase their skills and knowledge related to research. One student remarked, "Working and learning as part of a collective team was a unique and helpful experience ... that differed significantly from the one-way, hierarchical teaching style that I experienced during my undergraduate career. The [PI] and [research] coordinator constantly solicited my feedback during team meetings." Another student stated, "This heuristic process diverged significantly from the way in which research classes were structured within the MSW program and allowed me to develop a deeper and critical understanding of how social work research is conducted in a practice setting."

Experiential Learning

Students involved in the evaluation highlighted how experiential learning helped them to better understand research concepts and methods within the classroom. One student observed, "My ability to link classroom learning with hands-on research helped me to excel in both Research I and II courses. One professor requested permission to use my class assignment as an example in future courses." Students also reflected on how their involvement improved their

overall learning experience within the MSW program. Such an experience highlighted the importance of implicit curriculum in the students' overall educational experience. As one student noted, "By conducting multiple literature searches ... I was able to learn about various fields of social work practice which helped me better understand the curriculum for my practice courses."

Of specific importance, students noted how direct engagement in research allowed for simultaneous learning and direct skill development. One student reflected, "During my experience I learned a lot about qualitative research and analysis, which included creating [interview guides] and questionnaires, creating focus group questions and conducting interviews, data input and analysis, presentations, report writing, program evaluation, and participatory observation."

Students also expressed that the implementation of evaluation tools was another experience not available in the classroom which provided direct learning and skill application. One student described the experience, stating, "I got direct, hands-on experience evaluating a program, writing reports, presenting on findings and challenges, and also doing much research related to not only the project but to key underlying and framing concepts such as immigration policy and social capital and community development." Another student remarked, "Employing a mixed methods and participatory approach has given me insight into the different ways of approaching research and those which are more holistic in scope." Another student recalled, "Gathering data through interviews, surveys, and observations, entering and analyzing data through statistical software ... allowed me to engage with the entire research and evaluation process ... seeing the implications and usefulness instantly as we were evaluating a program." Such reflections highlighted how directly experiencing the entire research process provided unique skills not typically associated with graduate social work course work.

In addition to key research and technical skills, students reported increased knowledge of the contents of the project, including immigrant issues, integration, and social capital.

Engagement in research supported students in learning to read and understand social work's literature in critical ways. One student noted, "I immersed myself into the literature on social capital and immigrant integration. I often brought in articles relevant to immigrant integration or social capital in general, other models being used, theories being touted, etc."

Another student reflected, "working directly in the community, I was also able to learn about various theories and connect them to social work practice. By the end of the evaluation, I had become highly knowledgeable in content areas such as immigrant civic engagement, social capital, and integration."

Through the interactive nature of the participant evaluation process, students were able to understand the issues at hand from an objective position while also directly engaging around issues of community integration, social capital, and immigrant services. Reflecting on their post-evaluation experience, one student noted, "Due to the strong connections I've made with key players in the project, I continue to be involved with one of the outcome pieces of the community dialogues, which occurred at a community-level during the project's third year. I am still part of the ongoing process of immigrant civic engagement and integration."

Concluding attitudes towards research

Experiential learning in a collaborative setting provided an effective framework for engaging students in research and fostered new thinking about research and its role in social work education and practice. Student researchers gained valuable knowledge about the research process in addition to tangible skills. Reflecting on overall growth as a researcher, one student stated, "At the beginning of the project, I had what I now feel, were basic research skills. At the

end of the evaluation, I feel I have expertise in quantitative and qualitative research methods. I am confident in my research abilities and able to apply the skills I gained from the project in the field.”

Tying the entire evaluation experience together, one student reflected, “I was able to understand the importance of conducting a comprehensive needs assessment, the need for a thoughtful grant writing process, and the challenges and barriers one faces when engaging a wide range of stakeholders to participate in a collaborative process. I can now align myself with any program implementation or evaluation position, due to this experience.”

Another student noted, “Being offered the space to engage in research activities directly, with the support and guidance of the [PI] and research coordinator, I was able to understand various methods of research, such as instrument development, survey implementation, and qualitative interviewing.” Highlighting the overall process, another student stated, “I now can appreciate how much the field of social work values qualitative information gathering, to ensure that the field is engaging in proper thinking.”

Student narratives revealed the transformative nature of their experiences and a clear shift in their comprehension and thinking about research. As one student noted, “Prior to my involvement in the project evaluation team I did not perceive myself as a researcher. Working with the evaluation team provided me with a safe environment in which I could challenge this perception and explore my role as a researcher. Following this experience, I became genuinely interested in research evaluation and felt more confident with my research skills and abilities.” Another student remarked, “Until this experience, I did not understand the connection between evaluation, research, and improvements to social work practice and social policy.” Such reflections show how students came to embody their role as a researcher within the evaluation

team and how identification as a researcher helped to transform their views on social work research.

Challenges

While tying classroom learning to actual practice is critical within MSW programs, it is often difficult for MSW students to directly engage in research within their field placements. One stated, "as an MSW student, I saw many of my fellow students lacking in interest and engagement with research in the classroom. Unable to tie classroom learning to the 'real world' setting, and unable to see tangible benefits of research, such as improvements to social work practice and social change, I witnessed many students develop an apathetic stance towards research." Such a scenario, and the fact that it likely persists throughout other MSW programs, carries implications for the future of social work research and demands critical thinking and creative development of new frameworks for engaging MSW students in social work research.

The benefits of working with students can also serve as a limitation for faculty engaging students in research. It can be difficult to move students from becoming passive learners to constructivists who frame their own research questions to observations, practice, and the assigned readings. Central to this process is critical and analytical thinking to ensure that individual, group, family, and community needs are best met. Building students' capacity, encouraging shared responsibility, and providing space for peer learning and experience is time consuming, labor intensive, and requires commitment. For the faculty, it requires sharing power, finding the balance of providing leadership and direction, while giving up a certain degree of control over the process. Such a process also requires trust in the students' capacity to do their best and be transparent in areas where they need help.

While the process of student engagement in faculty research may be messy and cumbersome, it is just as important to recognize student outcomes beyond conference presentations and published manuscripts detailing the project and research findings. Working collaboratively with students creates a cadre of research practitioners who may exponentially impact and transform social welfare policy and practice. The dialogical discourse is enriching for all participants.

Discussion and Implications for Praxis

Scholars analyzing students' attitudes toward research consistently identify that social work students experience research anxiety and view the research process as unimportant to practice (Adam et al., Green et al., 2001; Lazar, 1991; Royce & Rompf, 1992; Wells, 2006). Scholars have linked such attitudes to a lack of interest or engagement in research among social work students. These findings provide a strong impetus for social work educators to assess the effectiveness of current curriculum and teaching methods for research courses, in terms of their ability to shift student attitudes.

Ensuring the proper development of future researchers is an essential part of sustaining and improving the social work profession. Developing effective frameworks for teaching social work research which communicate the importance of research and its relation to practice are both necessary and vital. Analysis of students' reflections revealed that engaging students directly in research, within a collaborative team structure, addressed many of the challenges of teaching social work research identified in the literature. Based on examination of the students' feedback, experiential learning and collaboration were identified as effective models for teaching and learning research methods.

These findings support the inclusion of collaborative and experience-based learning models within faculty research. While integrating experiential and collaborative learning within course curriculum holds potential to improve social work students' engagement with and understanding of research, this may not be feasible in all MSW programs. Therefore, engagement in faculty research is suggested as a model to encourage students to be more critical and effective consumers of research literature. Furthermore, teaching social work research through direct, supervised, and collaborative engagement of students in faculty research can support implicit curriculum, improve learning outcomes for students, help them explore their role as a researcher, and identify research as part of the social work profession.

While recognizing the challenges and limitations of engaging graduate social work students in faculty research, including ethical and practical considerations, student outcomes described in this article provide an impetus for further exploration and deliberation regarding experiential and collaborative models for teaching social work research.

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