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Student Attitudes Toward Poverty In A Social Welfare Policy Course: Online Versus Face To Face

By: **Leah Hamilton**[1] and Lindsay Daughtry[1]

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The growth of online higher education has presented important questions for social workers in academia. Can a human-based profession be properly taught online? In macro courses, are social work students able to gain a complex understanding of human experience, social justice, and oppression without the benefit of face-to-face debate and dialogue? In an undergraduate social welfare policy course, pre and post anonymous opinions surveys were collected on the causes of poverty. Students in both a face-to-face and an online course section, were asked to rate their agreement with the statements "Poverty is usually caused by individual actions" and "Poverty is usually caused by societal actions." While no statistically significant changes appeared for face-to-face students, online students were more likely to decrease blame for individual actions and increased attribution for societal actions at posttest. Reasons for this difference will be discussed, including the possible role of peer influence in face-to-face course sessions.

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The growth of online higher education has presented important questions for social workers in academia. Can a human-based profession be properly taught online? In macro courses, are social work students able to gain a complex understanding of human experience, social justice, and oppression without the benefit of face-to-face debate and dialogue? In an undergraduate social welfare policy course, pre and post anonymous opinions surveys were collected on the causes of poverty. Students in both a face-to-face and an online course section, were asked to rate their agreement with the statements "Poverty is usually caused by individual actions" and "Poverty is usually caused by societal actions." While no statistically significant changes appeared for face-to-face students, online students were more likely to decrease blame for individual actions and increased attribution for societal actions at posttest. Reasons for this difference will be discussed, including the possible role of peer influence in face-to-face course sessions.

Keywords

distance learning, higher education, education, social sciences, curriculum, politics and social sciences, political science, social work

In recent years, social work education has encountered much change and development in the area of online course delivery (Cummings, Foels, & Chaffin, 2013). Meanwhile, a lively debate regarding the proper role and function of distance pedagogies has emerged in the literature. Cohen (2003), for example, suggests that there is no substantial difference between learning outcomes for students in face-to-face versus distance education courses. Furthermore, teaching social work courses online may improve students' ability to rehearse their evaluative and interviewing skills because the use of technology allows students the advantage of practicing in a less hectic atmosphere (Cummings et al., 2013). Importantly, online social work courses can also provide educational opportunities to a larger student population than traditional higher education settings (Faul, Frey, & Barber, 2004).

However, others have argued that online courses are not the best way for social work students to practice their craft. Some research has suggested that online social work courses may cause students to become socially isolated and miss opportunities to practice interactional skills (Collins, Coleman, Ing, & Gabor, 2002). Similarly, Banks and Faul (2007) argue that online courses may come at the expense of replacing the valuable one-on-one experience that on-campus classes provide. Outside of this debate, the growth of

distance technology in higher education in general has meant that a greater number of social work students are receiving their education either partially or completely online. It is, therefore, critical to continue exploring the outcomes and experiences of distance social work students.

Research in this area has been largely positive. For example, a study conducted by Cummings et al. (2013) contrasted the learning outcomes for social work students who participated in online sections of a graduate evidence-based practice with groups course with on-campus students of the same course. The primarily online sections of the course also consisted of a few face-to-face Saturday sessions. When comparing the online and face-to-face students, there was no substantial difference discovered between the two cohorts in the areas of knowledge of leadership skills, exam scores or students' evaluations of effectiveness of the course (Cummings et al., 2013). This is noteworthy because students taking the online course were employed at jobs for many more hours than face-to-face students, therefore

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having obligations and time constraints elsewhere. Furthermore, distance education students reported high levels of approval for the course and their instructor.

Another study, conducted by Wilke and Vinton (2006), evaluated the first cohorts of an all-online advanced standing master's of social work program. The authors compared the cohorts with an on-campus cohort of also advanced standing students. Results indicated that there were several differences demographically between the two groups, such as students of the online cohort having more job experience than those in the on-campus cohort. However, few differences existed in regard to satisfaction and educational outcomes at the end of the program.

Although social work practice instructors ought to continue investigation of the acquisition of interactional skills in an online format, policy teachers must consider whether the online environment lends itself to a sophisticated understanding of social and economic inequality or acquisition of advocacy skills. The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE; 2008) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standard (EPAS) 2.1.5 calls for the advancement of social and economic fairness and basic human rights. This policy explains that social workers are expected to promote human rights and social justice for all. Social workers are also expected to comprehend the various forms of repression and discrimination that affect others and participate in exercises that assist in bringing forth societal and economic justice (Council on Social Work Education, 2008).

Measuring these skills, however, can be elusive. Some have begun by measuring student attitudes toward those in poverty. The study of attitudes in the field of social work is important as these beliefs may influence practice interactions, voting behaviors, and willingness to advocate for change (Cozzarelli, Tagler, & Wilkinson, 2001). A study conducted by Cozzarelli et al. (2001) sought to examine feelings about poverty, stereotypes directed at those in poverty, and the attributions of poverty among 209 undergraduate students. Results indicated that stereotypes in relation to the poor were much more negative when contrasted with stereotypes in relation to the middle class. Overall, participants were more likely to blame those in poverty themselves as opposed to some other cause. However, opinions tended to vary depending on the individual's sociodemographic background (Cozzarelli et al., 2001).

Similarly, Schwartz and Robinson (1991) examined the perceptions of reasons for poverty from three different groups of social work students enrolled in undergraduate courses. The three groups consisted of students at the beginning of their coursework, students midway through, and students close to graduating. Students who had completed coursework in social policy rendered less significance toward "blaming the victim" justifications of poverty than their less-progressed counterparts. These results may suggest that social work students are able to gain more social-justice-oriented conceptions of poverty over the course of their education (Schwartz & Robinson, 1991).

Still, it is important to establish whether these same gains can be made in an online education format, and a paucity of research exists to explore this question. The current study examines student attitudes toward poverty in one 200-level social work course titled "The American Social Welfare System." The course is required for social work majors and is also approved for general education credit, which means that student participants included both social work majors and nonmajors. In general, the course covers social welfare policy history, social inequality, and poverty. The assigned textbook is Jansson's (2014) *Reluctant Welfare State*, which presents social welfare policy via the lens of the National Association of Social Workers's (2008) *Code of Ethics*. The primary aim of this study was to determine whether differences existed in student attitudes toward poverty before and after the course. Furthermore, an online section of the course was developed in Spring 2014, and this study seeks to determine whether changes in students attitudes differed across face-to-face and online sections.

Method

Students in this course self-select into either a face-to-face or online section, therefore creating a nonrandom sample. Although demographics were not collected for purposes of full anonymity (to be discussed in greater detail later in this section), it may be useful to describe the demographics of the university overall: a medium-sized university in the American southeast; the majority of students are White (85%), female (55%), middle class, and traditional aged (average is 20.93 years; Appalachian State University, 2014). It is the observation of the instructor that students in this course largely match the demographics of the university overall, with the possible exception of a higher percentage of females in a social work course.

The primary author was also the sole instructor for all course sections under analysis, which include spring, summer, and fall 2014, and spring 2015. The face-to-face course met two times per week for lecture and discussion, with supplemental material provided via the Learning Management System (LMS). This material included reading quizzes, PowerPoint slides, several documentaries, and supplemental reading materials. The online sections of the course include the same LMS materials, with the addition of asynchronous discussion boards and a few additional assignments. The online course was conducted entirely asynchronously although students were free to schedule face-to-face meetings with the instructor as needed.

During the first and last week of the described course, students were invited to respond to two statements on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*) via the online LMS (Moodle). These statements include "Poverty is usually caused by societal actions" and "Poverty is usually caused by individual actions." A valid and reliable scale of attitudes toward poverty was developed

by Atherton, Gemmel, Haagenstad, and Holt (1993). However, the instructor chose not to utilize this scale for two reasons. First, the scale includes such statements as "Poor people are dishonest." The primary author/course instructor worried that such phrasing would set a negative tone for the course, especially when used in a pretest. Second, the scale includes 37 items and might have produced lower response rates among time-limited college students.

All responses were anonymous and students were informed that they were free to decline to participate without consequence to their course grade. Students were also provided with information regarding institutional review board procedures and approval. This anonymity was important due to the author/instructor's apprehension that any identifying information might influence student honesty. However, anonymity also produced significant challenges for analysis. Because individual student changes could not be tracked, it was impossible to conduct any sort of regression. Instead, a related samples Wilcoxon signed-ranked test was employed to analyze pre–post changes in student responses and an individual sample Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to compare face-to-face versus online students. Data analysis was conducted via the SPSS program with charts created via the Excel program.

Findings

With five online sections (n = 154 at pretest, n = 137 at posttest) and three face-to-face sections (n = 100 at pretest, n = 92 at posttest) during the 18 months under examination, the sample included a total of 254 participants at pretest and 229 at posttest. Attrition is most likely explained by students dropping the course or not completing course requirements. Response rates were fairly high, with an average of one to two students declining to participate in each course section.

The first research question sought to discover changes in the total population over the length of the course. For the entire sample, students significantly decreased (p = .000) their agreement with the statement "Poverty is usually caused by individual actions" from a mean score of 3.67 (3 = *neutral*, 4 = *disagree*) to 3.70 at posttest. At the same time, students (N) significantly increased (p = .035) their agreement with the statement "Poverty is usually caused by societal actions" from a mean score of 2.48 (2 = *agree*, 3 = *neutral*) to 2.27 at posttest.

The second research question was answered in two ways. First, we examined differences between online and face-to-face students at pretest and posttest. For each of the two statements, there were no statistically significant differences at either pretest or posttest. Second, we examined in-group changes for each of the two statements. Contrary to findings for the full sample, face-to-face students actually *increased* their agreement with the statement "Poverty is usually caused by individual actions" from a mean score of 3.77 (3 = *neutral*, 4 = *disagree*) at pretest to 3.73 at posttest. However,
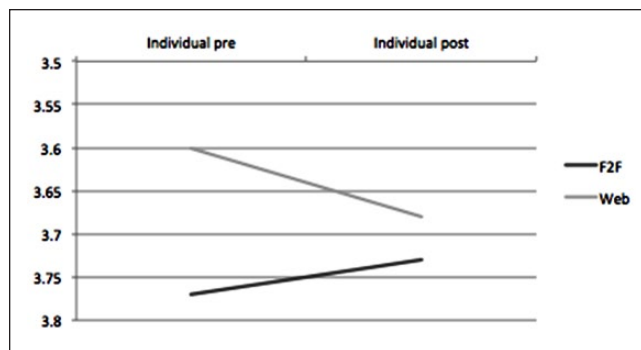

Figure 1. Changes in student agreement with the statement "Poverty is usually caused by individual actions."
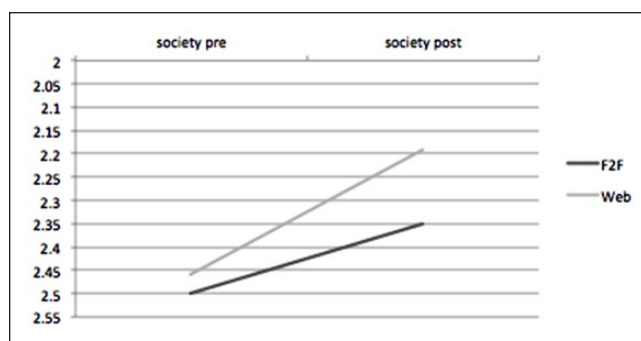

Figure 2. Changes in student agreement with the statement "Poverty is usually caused by societal actions."

these changes were slight and not statistically significant (p = .289). At the same time, face-to-face students increased their agreement with the statement "Poverty is usually caused by societal actions" from a mean score of 2.50 (2 = *agree*, 3 = *neutral*) at pretest to 2.35 at posttest. These changes were also not statistically significant (p = .670).

Changes for online students were statistically significant for both statements and most likely influenced the outcomes of the full sample. Web students significantly decreased (p = .000) their agreement with the statement "Poverty is usually caused by individual actions" from a mean score of 3.60 (3 = *neutral*, 4 = *disagree*) at pretest to 3.68 at posttest. Meanwhile, these students significantly increased (p = .011) their agreement with the statement "Poverty is usually caused by societal actions" from a mean score of 2.46 (2 = *agree*, 3 = *neutral*) at pretest to 2.19 at posttest. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the mean changes in each group for the two statements.

Discussion

The quasi-experimental design of this study represents a significant limitation for interpretation. Self-selection of the students into either the face-to-face or online sections of the course (and resultant nonrandom sample) could significantly

influence findings. It is likely that students were self aware when registering for the course and chose the section that best supported their own learning styles. This could mean that students who are less comfortable with distance technologies would get less out of the course than those who willingly volunteer. Furthermore, the guarantee of full anonymity limited tracking of individual changes and the opportunity for more sophisticated methods of analysis. However, it is also possible that this anonymity presented a strength by encouraging greater honesty and increasing response rates. Finally, attrition rates may have also influenced results. Students who were put off by the social justice orientation of the course (and, therefore, less likely to report favorable changes at course end) may have been more likely to drop the course midterm.

One of the most interesting outcomes of this research is the mean increase of agreement for both statements, "Poverty is usually caused by individual actions" and "Poverty is usually caused by societal actions," among face-to-face students. The primary author/instructor assumed that these statements would have an inverse relationship. It is possible that the discussion-based model for the face-to-face section either confused the issue for some students or created a more complex understanding. It is also important to note that in the American southeast, it is not uncommon to have very outspoken and politically conservative students dominate classroom conversations. It is possible that these comments swayed previously neutral students. However, these results should not be weighted heavily as neither change was statistically significant. The fact that statistically significant changes *were* observed among online students is noteworthy. It is possible that in an introductory course, there is value in allowing students to absorb the material independently before being exposed to a discussion-based classroom.

It is recommended that future research in this area find ways to gather demographic information, individual student data, and employ valid and reliable measures without compromising student honesty or the course atmosphere. Furthermore, it is as yet unclear whether attitudes toward poverty are the most effective method of measuring a student's acquisition of social justice concepts. Establishing this relationship or discovering better tools for measuring CSWE's (2008) macro focused EPAS will be critical to measuring the true effectiveness of online social work education.

Authors' Note

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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