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Beyond Obligation: Social Workers as Lifelong Learners

Carla Mueller
Lindenwood University

M. Denise King

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Article by Carla Mueller, EdD and M. Denise King, PhD

Abstract

The profession of Social Work is dynamic. "Social workers practice in rapidly changing and complex environments where they encounter challenges that include increasing evidence-based practice requirements, a shifting information landscape, and diminishing workplace resources" (Nissen, Pendell, Jivanjee, & Goodluck, 2014). Lifelong learning has long been recognized in the field; indeed, it is incorporated into our professional responsibilities. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics states, "social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work" (2017, Section 4.01). Social workers are also held accountable by state licensure to participate in ongoing professional development. Lifelong learning in social work is deliberate and intentional with benefits on professional and personal levels. This article explores social workers' inherent value of fortifying relationships which drives a need to continually learn, beyond the obligation, about the changing contexts in which we practice.

Introduction

Social work is often a misunderstood and somewhat maligned profession. Many perceive social workers to be 'baby snatchers' due to our work in child protective services. Others view us as 'bleeding heart liberals' due to our strong beliefs and values in social justice and advocacy. There are elements of truth in both perceptions as social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that "helps individual people, families, groups, organizations, and communities to prevent or resolve problems in social and psychological functioning, meet basic human needs, achieve life-enhancing goals and create a just society" (Suppes & Welles, 2018, p. 5). Global social work "promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work" (International Federation of Social Workers, n.d.). Social work is essentially a vocation of trained change agents; using values and skills-based functions that translate into services designed to bring about change.

Social work is a well-established profession, having its roots in the history of the United States since 1888. A profession is recognized by characteristics, such as the existence of a monitored and regulated academic curriculum; valued and rewarded practitioner expertise and experience; and structured credentialing often including licensing and criteria for continuing professional development (Evetts, 2014). Social work meets all of these criteria and is further distinguished with a code of ethics that unifies the values and beliefs of the social work profession. Our professional organization, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), develops and approves the NASW Code of Ethics, revised in 2017, "to articulate its basic values, ethical principles, and ethical standards" (p. 1) of the profession. Among the ethical principles is the value of competence. "Social workers should strive to become and remain proficient in professional practice and the performance of professional functions" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017, Section 4.01(b)). This sets the precedence for the professional obligation of lifelong learning. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), established in 1952, is the accrediting body of our academic curriculum. CSWE "supports quality social work education and provides opportunities for leadership and professional development" (CSWE, 2015, p. 1).

The authors, as social workers with a combined 75 years of experience in the profession, agree that competent and credible social work requires an emphasis on self-awareness. This awareness leads to a personal obligation to seek new conscious knowledge of self, introspect on this new information, and then infuse this personal growth into effective social work practice. We embrace the notion of lifelong learning as going beyond our professional obligation of keeping current on evidenced-practice methodologies, revised policies and practices, and emerging trends. Both types of lifelong learning, professional obligation and learning for learning's sake, are required to remain a truly competent social worker.

Brief Literature Review

Nissen, Pendell, Jivanjee, and Goodluck (2015) conducted an extensive review of scholarly literature related to the subject of lifelong learning and social work. Although they found very little research directly related to lifelong learning in social work, these authors offered a definition that sets well with this article.

The concept of lifelong learning relates to a set of values and principles regarding the role of ongoing acquisition, integration, and application of new knowledge throughout one's lifetime, and also includes the practices and structures that position professionals to be relevant, effective, and engaged in their careers. (p. 386)

This definition encompasses both professional and personal development (learning for learning's sake).

Lifelong learning can be summarized as a continuous, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for both types of ongoing and consistent learning for social workers. Several researchers have sought to understand and describe lifelong learning,

including its many benefits. Numerous benefits of lifelong learning have been identified including:

- enhanced understanding of the world;

- the provision of more and better opportunities for employment and careers;

- improved quality of life;

- boosts confidence and self-esteem;

- keeping the brain active;

- maintain and improve professional service delivery;

- acquisition of new knowledge;

- refinement of skills;

- challenging beliefs;

- reinforcement of professional attitudes;

- fun;

- openness to change when it occurs; and

- the impetus for change in the lives individual. (NASW, 2012; Nissen et al., 2015)

The impetus for lifelong learning has a variety of beginnings. Lam, Wong, Hui, Lee, & Chan, (2016) have suggested that one role of academic institutions in shaping the values of the profession includes encouraging social work students to commit to lifelong learning. Indeed, the two primary organizations providing leadership for social work education and social workers, CSWE and NASW, respectively, both express an expectation for educators to instill the desire to learn throughout the curriculum to ensure that graduates are cognizant of the importance of continuing education. In accordance with the ethical standards of the profession, Lam et al. (2016) assured that educational institutions and professional associations are already effective in providing sufficient knowledge to perform as competent social workers upon graduation. They emphasize that it is imperative for educators to inspire students to incorporate self-directed continuous learning and development, not just to acquire and maintain credentials, but to embrace self-directed and peer learning to enhance their own competency beyond formal institutional learning.

Jivanjee, Pendell, Nissen, & Goodluck (2015) acknowledge that lifelong learning is vital to social work education. They investigated the stimulus for lifelong learning among social work students and community practitioners. They conducted a study in which they interviewed baccalaureate level and graduate level students, alumni practitioners, and field supervisors. They found that overall, many interviewees were aware of and amenable to lifelong learning at all levels of involvement. Participants verbalized the importance of lifelong learning to their education and practice as well as the impact of staying engaged in learning. They were cognizant of the personal commitment and responsibility involved in the continuous learning process. Moreover, participants identified the need for humility and openness to acquiring new information. Participants in their study also acknowledged the responsibility of faculty members as role models and inspiration for continuous learning.

Congress (2012) purports that no graduation from any level of education signifies the end of learning for social work educators or practitioners. The rapidly evolving nature of new social problems and issues demands the acquisition of additional knowledge and skills to help people adjust to and cope with their situations. Hence the need for continuing education is constructed to correlate with maintaining competency in practice. Indeed, NASW regards continuing education as "an essential activity for ensuring quality social work services for clients" (NASW, 2012, p. 397). In this regard, NASW has established continuing education standards; complete with specific content area in which competency should be maintained. The writers of this article, understand and concur with this basic precept. Moreover, we contend that for many social workers, the desire for knowledge moves well beyond education and practice (the professional obligation) and ventures into learning for the sake of knowledge or learning. Other researchers also acknowledge learning for learning's sake.

Lifelong learning: Professional obligation — Perron, Taylor, Glass, & Margerum-Leys (2010) offered that the pervasiveness of communication devices has "transformed social relationships, education, and the dissemination of information" (p. 68). These researchers view the influence of information and communication technology as gaining prominence in advancing the field of social work in both education and continuing education. The pervasive nature of "maintaining social connection through Internet networks" (p. 71) has become a significant issue for people of all ages. Their research implies that competency and literacy beyond higher education and continuing education is motivated by the need to stay current in all areas of life. They also indicate the use and growth of technology as important to social work education, practice, and research.

Lifelong learning: Learning for learning's sake - Maidment & Macfarlane (2011) disagree with perspectives that portray learning is primarily connected to career endeavors. To counter this construction of learning, their research yielded findings from a study that began to determine the connection between craft work and fostering well-being within a group of older women. Their findings suggested "sustained community development, transformative social relations, and political activity consistent with the principles of community development" (p. 286). They discovered that the group work provided learning opportunities that connected them to each other in diverse ways. By

analyzing the data on the group, the research team identified "sustained participation, generation of social capital, and fostering lifelong learning" (p.286) as associated with principles of empowerment and self-efficacy. The authors likened these findings to the critical group work typically promoted in social work practice. These findings speak to the value of lifelong learning well outside the realm of professional obligations. Nissen et al. (2015) referred to this type of learning as lifelong education, "a natural and necessary process, and a combination of both individual and group experiences usually aimed at problem-solving" (p. 388). This type of learning was characterized as "lifelong learning distinct from, though related to lifelong education" (p. 387).

Hafford-Letchfield and Formosa (2016) also explored lifelong learning not specifically related to the profession. They describe lifelong learning as "providing formal, non-formal, and informal learning opportunities" (p. 241). Their research focused on the notion of lifelong learning as an important mechanism to support the care needs of older adults. They penned an article on the concept of 'coproduction,' an emerging trend that incorporates the input of service recipients into feedback for an agency to improve the agency's delivery of services to its clients. In their schema, lifelong learning encompasses personal development of fulfillment as well as social inclusiveness for older adults. These researchers essentially describe strategies for improving the provision of services to older members of the society. They assert service users can be taught specific skills to enhance decision-making to counteract the challenges and issues that arise in later life.

Skills & dispositions

Lifelong learning: Professional obligation — NASW's Code of Ethics (2017) maintains the value of competency. The Code states, "social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work" (NASW, 2017, Section 4.01(b)). NASW has published standards for continuing professional education to offer structure and guidance in navigating the wide variety of continuing education offerings. The emphasis on this professional expectation is personal responsibility; as social workers have responsibility to clients, to self, and to the profession. Continuing education is self-directed. The social worker is obligated to acknowledge one's learning needs, actively participate in professional education to meet that need, and integrate the knowledge gained into practice (NASW, 2012).

Most states require licensure of social workers, particularly those practicing in post-graduate social work employment. Although this has become a primary reason for practitioners to actively seek out and attend continuous training, (usually 30 hours per every two years to maintain state licensure) (Jivanjee et al., 2015; Thyer & Pignotti, 2016), other reasons to pursue growth and awareness through professional development exist.

Beyond the personal obligation of social workers to continually grow and learn, NASW (2012) broadens the responsibility to the provider of the training and to the social service agency administrators who employ social workers. The provider is responsible

for the delivery of quality continuing education events to meet the learning needs of social workers. Social work leadership is responsible for infusing ongoing professional development into the culture of the agency. The NASW Code of Ethics, Section 3.08, Continuing Education and Staff Development (2017) requires social work administrators and supervisors to "take reasonable steps to provide or arrange for continuing education and staff development for all staff for whom they are responsible". The administrator should develop a systematic review of staff and client needs for professional renewal and development. Many organizations have staff committees on professional development. Financial support for professional development activities has to be incorporated into the agency budget, even with dwindling resources and concerns about funding are forthcoming (Congress, 2012).   Leaders should ensure information gained is then disseminated to all social work employees and integrated into the practice of the agency as appropriate.

Social work is practiced in a context of rapid change and increasing complexity with policy development, research findings, and theoretical development (Jivanjee, et al., 2015; Nissen et al, 2014). Community needs change, population diversity with those at risk change, and funding streams change including diminishing revenue for professional development. These changes require social workers to remain current and abreast of information that directly impacts social work clients and services.

Social work educators recognize the importance of lifelong learning and ensure their graduates are committed to continually updating their skills to ensure that they are relevant and effective (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). Ongoing education must be built on a sound academic social work foundation. Traditionally, social work arenas of practice have been child welfare, gerontology, mental health, schools, domestic violence, medical care, substance use, and within the criminal justice system.   However, new fields of social work practice have developed over the last decade including, but not limited to, social work with veterans, assist animals, the environment, and in sports. With such innovations comes the requirement to learn new information and develop new repertoires to enrich social work competencies.

The use of technology and the implications for social work practice has conflicted with the growing use of the Internet and other communication technologies such as social media. As such, technology is opening access to services such as in the contributions to health improvement in developing countries, so also have arisen concerns as to confidentiality and the sharing of personal health information digitally (Perron, et al., 2010). Professional development is needed to address this ethical dilemma as policies are defined and refined.

Lifelong learning: Learning for learning's sake — Additional less population/problem directed skills required to maintain professional and ethical social work practice appropriate for lifelong learning include the topics of critical thinking, mental wellness and stress management, time management, web-based research, social networking, and computer skills.

Beyond professional obligation, comes the ongoing need for personal growth and awareness to aid social workers in demanding and challenging roles. Compassion fatigue can be the outcome of the high levels of empathy required to be successful in the field compounded by the emotional demands of multi-problem clients who are served by social workers. Often this 'secondary traumatization' or 'burnout' is further expressed with empathy from personal distress, problems of others in the social worker's personal and professional network, and the social ills of society and the world. Thomas (2013) supports the need for social workers to manage their personal reactivity to stressful work experiences and learn to use empathy more judiciously. These skills are part of lifelong learning beyond the practice skills frequently required in agency professional development plans.

Dismayed about their findings in the social work specific literature, Nissen et al. (2016) took their research a step further by developing a preliminary practice model of lifelong learning for social work education. Inherent in their perspective is a sense of urgency that amid the swiftly changing and complex environments in which social workers practice, the profession of social work should be more proactive in encouraging lifelong learning related practice behaviors into the social work curriculum. Their model presents lifelong learning as the center and foundation of social work education that is complemented by "knowledge, values and skills; encompasses the organizational context in which social workers can expect to work in; represents the dynamic community and cultural context of social work practice" (p. 394). They further suggest that in order to move the social work profession forward, the organized profession needs to advance their application and integration of ideas related to lifelong learning. They conclude with the statement, "Better that the profession lead the charge to grow its capacity and respond to changes, lest the profession be regulated to do so in ways that may not comport to social work values" (p. 396). In essence, the issue of lifelong learning is a continuum beginning with academic education, leading to professional development for enhancement of skills and practice, and ultimately progressing to learning for learning's sake.

Assessment

The NASW Code of Ethics 4, Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals (2017), defines competence as a core value of the profession. Section 4.01 (b) Competence states, "Social workers should base practice on recognized knowledge, including empirically-based knowledge relevant to social work and social work ethics" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). Concerns raised as to the ongoing professional development of competent social workers include the provision of quality education. Continuing education opportunities are usually screened and approved by a state or accrediting body, however, without consumer complaint, little oversight as to the actual provision of the training is required. The concern grows when non-evidenced-based practice information, 'pseudoscience,' is presented and then used, raising the possibility of harm to clients and users of the social work service (Thyer & Pignotti, 2016).

Most continuing education sessions provide pre/post testing to assess knowledge gained or participant evaluations as to the effectiveness of the program; this information is rarely shared with anyone other than the provider and the funding source for the training. Questions are then raised as to whether new skills and evidence-based information is learned, if the social worker is able to practice new skills and/or integrate the new knowledge, and whether this new learning is used on the job when the social worker returns to their jobs (Congress, 2012).

Ultimately, social work services are assessed by the client. As many services are provided via government funding, social workers are accountable to taxpayers and the greater society.

Discussion/Concluding remarks

Several researchers (Congress, 2012; Jivanjee et al, 2015; Nissen et al, 2015) have sought to understand, describe, and/or categorize lifelong learning. Many summarize lifelong learning as a continuous, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for both professional and personal development. While lifelong learning is often conceptualized as specifically related to professional development, in many instances, the desire to learn continues well past career involvement. It becomes a commitment to learning not only because you have to, but also because you want to. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NAICE, 2010) recognizes a need for a learning society where "we can learn our way out of our current difficulties" (p. 13). The adult learning organization also advocates for lifelong learning to contribute to making "vibrant and inclusive communities, entrepreneurial, innovative, and successful businesses and public services, and to make the world a better place for our children" (p. 13). Perhaps, we can begin with the social work profession.

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