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Chapter 11

Hindsight is 20/20: The Role of Reflection in Learning

Jenifer Evers

My teaching philosophy hinges on student-directed learning, creating opportunities for student success, and depth of learning versus rote memorization. Over the years, I have experimented with different ways to assess student understanding of new concepts as well as to stay connected to individual students in a timely and effective manner. I simultaneously recognize the difficulty of accomplishing this in a manner that is not terribly time-consuming for the student or for myself. Ultimately, I created an assignment that achieves my goal using several qualities highlighted in Costa et al.'s Habits of Mind framework (2022).

As a licensed Clinical Social Worker, I had no previous teaching experience when I took my position as a Clinical Assistant Professor of Social Work at Utah State University in 2013. However, it quickly became apparent that many of the practices used by social workers with clients pertain to work with students. We meet clients where they are in their process, and we endeavor to create a professional alliance with them to support their efforts toward goals. The same is true when working with students.

Social workers must first develop a rapport and create a relationship with clients. From this foundation all work takes place, and the quality of that relationship directly impacts client success. Throughout the client–social worker relationship, the worker is responsible for meeting the client where they are. We must get on the client's "page," meaning that we come to understand the client's perspective through ongoing interaction and exploration. The client leads the process, teaching the social worker about themselves and, in turn, the social worker helps the client come to a greater understanding of themselves and how they might best achieve the goals they set for themselves.

Teaching demands a similar approach. We endeavor to create a relationship with each student, even if that means that we only learn their names. We attempt to discover where students are in their learning and understanding and provide feedback based on those revelations. We create a sort of dialogue in that process. Ideally, the feedback provided by instructors influences future submissions and we continue to validate and supplement or correct understanding demonstrated in student assessment.

To meet someone where they are, whether in learning or goal-achievement, one must allow the individual to explain that to them. How do we ask students to describe their understanding? Through numerous assessments, including evaluation of written work, quizzes/exams, presentations, and so on. These tasks are often daunting and require students to somewhat separate from their own educational location due to the writing/presentation rigor. To overcome that, we might instead consider allowing students to reflect on their own thoughts regarding the material they have encountered and put thoughts into their own words. This allows students to think about their thinking and encourages them to make connections between past knowledge/experience and new information, both of which are important Habits of Mind (Costa & Kallick, 2008).

After engaging with material (assigned readings, lectures, etc.), students will find little to no difficulty providing a list of five things learned pertaining to this new material. In fact, this can usually be done in a short amount of time and with little additional effort. However, left to our own devices, we rarely take the time to intentionally reflect, despite its proven efficacy at helping us learn (Mann, 2016). Multiple studies indicate the positive impact reflection can have on academic success (Costa & Kallick, 2008; Dewey, 1944; Menekse, 2020; National Research Council, 2012; Rodgers, 2002). John Dewey (2003) noted that "we do not learn from our

experience, we learn from reflecting on our experience” and explained that reflection requires us to “look back, analysing, seeing events in a wider context and considering how what we realise could be applied in the future” (p. 78). Rodgers (2002) identifies four criteria that she believes characterize Dewey’s concept of reflection along with its purposes:

1. Ultimately, reflection is a process of making meaning that renders deeper understanding, encouraging connection to existing knowledge and experience.
2. Reflection is a structured way of thinking rooted in scientific inquiry.
3. Reflection should happen through interaction with others.
4. Reflection requires that one is concerned with their own growth as well as that of others.

Costa, Kallick, and Zmuba include “Applying Past Knowledge to New Situations” in their Habits of Mind framework, which posits that finding connections between new information and past experiences reinforces learning (Costa et al., 2022). Not only does reflection have the potential to positively impact academic success; it also holds additional value for social work students (as well as those in related disciplines), specifically as it prompts students to engage in a process critical to professional development in social work, which is to reflect on professional growth and review progress with clients.

The process of ongoing reflection, an essential Habit of Mind, is one integral to social work practice (Costa et al., 2022). Certainly, the social worker routinely asks the client to reflect on their own existing knowledge of any situation they may find themselves in. Examining the client experience since initiation of services accomplishes many purposes: it allows the client to recognize the change process which typically occurs in slow, incremental steps (often without notice); it provides an opportunity to assess and modify client goals, as those may need to be revised throughout the process; and it allows the worker to check in with the client regarding their satisfaction with the direction and progress of the work.

Most closely connected to this assignment is the practice of both informal and formal reflection on client progress. Similar to learning, (client) change occurs slowly and over time. This mandates that we as professionals (either in social work or education generally) highlight that process over time as well as at the conclusion of the work, either through termination with a client or end of a course. Social workers often review a client’s progress throughout the working relationship as well as at the end of it. In social work, we are required by agency and funding policies to submit reports on client progress which can take place as frequently as daily (in progress notes), weekly (in agency staffing meetings), or as long as three months (in the form of formal paperwork). This information is used to review progress and to modify treatment goals, all of which inform our continued work with the client. Often, a social worker will ask a client to identify key takeaways at the end of a session as a means of helping the client distill their insights and intentions prior to concluding. This proves useful as clients gain clarity on the value of the session and the insights gained, a process described as metacognition, another essential Habit of Mind (Costa et al., 2022).

This can hold true for students as well. When they reflect on the value of the material they read or knowledge gained from engaging with required resources and assignments, students are able to structure their thoughts and make clearer sense of them or think about their thinking (metacognition). The reflection process requires them to put into their own words the key concepts that stood out to them and allows them to make connections between the new knowledge they have gained and things they already understand and know.

In the “5 Things” assignment, students build each week on their existing knowledge and may review the compiled list to look for connections or themes. It requires them to use their own

words to identify the information they choose to highlight from the material. It also allows the instructor to review the information to correct any misinformation that may exist and to add more context or content to existing material. Commenting on every student’s list each week—even if it is just one item and ideas are validated or reinforced—results in an ongoing conversation between the instructor and the student and personalizes the student experience. In this way, the students engage in the Habits of Mind of striving for accuracy (continuously trying to understand and integrate new knowledge) and persisting (grappling with what they have learned to make sense of it) (Costa et al., 2022).

Finally, requiring students to make connections in their weekly reflection asks them to draw on prior knowledge and experiences to connect with new material, which Costa and Kallick (2008) include in their Habits of Mind framework. Students gain a deeper understanding of a text when authentic connections are made. Galinsky (2010) identifies similarities, difference, relationships, and unusual connections as areas of connection that can deepen understanding. Thus, encouraging students to make connections is critical in supporting their acquisition and understanding of new information.

Both in social work practice and education, we use reflection to gain insight into the subject’s perspective and experience (or to meet them where they are). The weekly reflection assignments allow an instructor to not only understand the student perspective (which informs their learning), but to also comment on the items listed. Instructors may provide clarification if something seems to have been misunderstood, if the student seems to have remaining questions, or they may deepen the insight conveyed through a nonsynchronous form of dialogue. Questions may be posed that can prompt continued thought on a statement. Observations about connections can also be made that link items listed within the same week or over a series of weeks.

Figure 11.1

Weekly Assignment Description

5 Things
Due: Weekly

Purpose: This weekly assignment allows you to reflect on the week’s topic, content, discussions, readings, etc. and identify important take-aways. Students will use this running list to complete a future assignment (course reflection).

Skills: The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills essential to your success in this course/in school/in this field/in professional life beyond school:

- Describe insights and understanding you had as you engaged in the week’s material
- Make connections to other courses, professional experience, or personal experience

Knowledge: This assignment will also help you to become familiar with the following important content knowledge in this discipline:

- Constructing coherent summaries of important information

Task: You will simply make a list of five things each week. Each listed item needs to be described well enough that you remember what you were referencing when you look back on it at the end of the semester. Students often make the mistake of listing one word or phrases without making them meaningful enough to remind them of what they learned by the end of the semester.

Criteria for Success: An excellent submission includes relevant material that is sufficiently detailed. Each week, the running list will be submitted (the list grows each week but is separated by date or week number). An example of this assignment is included in Canvas Files under “Assignment Examples.”

Note. Using the transparent assignment format.

Figure 11.2

Weekly Assignment Description

5 Things (70 Points – 5 pts x 14 class meetings)

Students will submit list of 5 things they learn each week during the semester. This list can include information from the textbook, the class activities/discussion, ideas from the weekly mini-lecture, or ways the material connects to the student's personal life. This should be a running document that is added to each week. (See example at end of this document)

Note. In a more traditional syllabus narrative.

Figure 11.3

Example of Weekly Student Submissions

5 things – 9/23/2019 SW 3050

1. Pg 96: Clients have the rights to their own beliefs, that they have made choices and can make their own...this one really stuck with me through its inherent simplicity and straightforward truth.
2. Labels while they help define and categorize things, people, thoughts, etc. in our lives, they can have negative impacts and connotation when used incorrectly. Its our job as social workers to understand how we label and place ourselves, our clients and others in our lives into specific categories that have influence over how we treat others.
3. Any one situation in which a social worker assists or helps a client can span across all the levels of practice; micro, mezzo and macro. Sometimes its necessary for a social worker to look at an issue through multiple lenses and realize that the problem or issue at hand may be a part of something much larger than the individual.
4. Taking the time to research and study an individual's cultural up-bringing, back ground and history as best you can as well as asking helpful questions of the client in a thoughtful, engaging and nonjudgmental way can lay the foundations for developing a deeper cultural understanding. Also being open minded and allowing yourself to be vulnerable in your ignorance, to not be the expert and remember that your client is the expert in his/her world of understanding will also allow the social worker in the process of understanding cultural issues that he/she is not accustomed to.
5. The Client / Practitioner relationship is a vulnerable one that depends on both parties being authentic and genuine with one another in order to establish a trusting, working relationship. Its up to the social worker to maintain professionalism and confidentiality in his/her work and to best serve their client with intention and genuineness.

Jenifer Evers

It can be so hard to watch clients make choices that you feel aren't in line with their goals, but it's essential that we do so. We can NEVER impede their right to self-determination. It's easier to violate than it seems...

Jenifer Evers

Nice insight and reflection on this tricky subject!

Jenifer Evers

We always want to look at the person in their environment - all of the aspects in their lives to see what contributes to or helps with a challenge. [...]

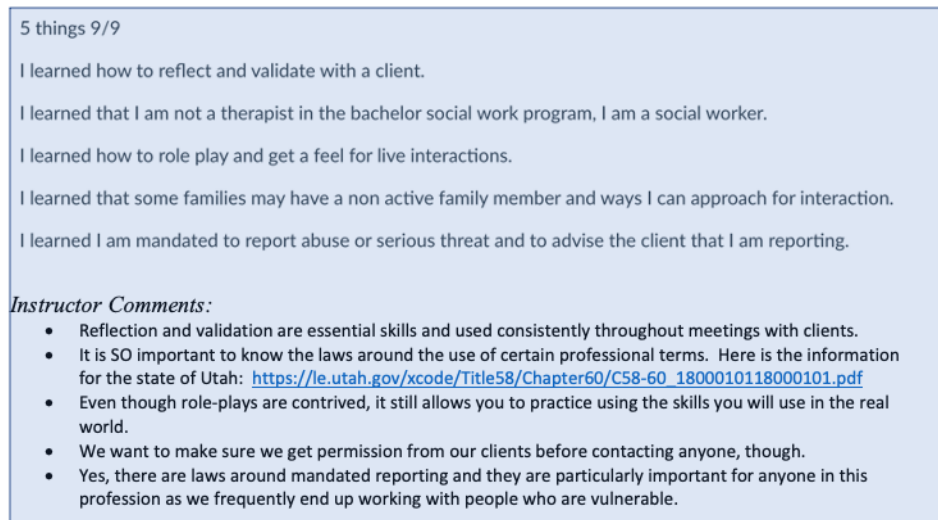
Jenifer Evers

YES!

Note. Instructor comments on right or below.

Figure 11.4

Second Example of Weekly Student Submission With Instructor Comments Left in “Assignment Comments” Box in LMS



5 things 9/9

I learned how to reflect and validate with a client.

I learned that I am not a therapist in the bachelor social work program, I am a social worker.

I learned how to role play and get a feel for live interactions.

I learned that some families may have a non active family member and ways I can approach for interaction.

I learned I am mandated to report abuse or serious threat and to advise the client that I am reporting.

Instructor Comments:

- Reflection and validation are essential skills and used consistently throughout meetings with clients.
- It is SO important to know the laws around the use of certain professional terms. Here is the information for the state of Utah: https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title58/Chapter60/C58-60_1800010118000101.pdf
- Even though role-plays are contrived, it still allows you to practice using the skills you will use in the real world.
- We want to make sure we get permission from our clients before contacting anyone, though.
- Yes, there are laws around mandated reporting and they are particularly important for anyone in this profession as we frequently end up working with people who are vulnerable.

I find grading these weekly assignments incredibly exciting, and I am often surprised by some of the student insights. The submissions vary greatly from one student to another—they might be a single sentence on each item or a full page of narrative describing a student’s insights and connections. I allow students to determine how they prefer to manage their lists. Students get out of any course what they put into it. We will always have students who submit minimal material while others go above and beyond. However, even the most minimal lists provide an opportunity for me to engage in individualized education, which has become increasingly challenging in the educational context. And, again, the purpose is to meet each student where they are and provide feedback that reinforces, supplements, or corrects ideas noted. Further, these assignments help bolster student confidence as they achieve a sense of success and deeper understanding through a relatively easy weekly assignment. Students also find the process of creating the ongoing list and the outcome worthwhile and meaningful. I receive unsolicited comments at course conclusions about how useful the comprehensive list is as students come to identify it as a resource summarizing what was learned over the semester.

Figure 11.5

Course Reflection Assignment Description

Course Reflection Paper

Due Date: 12/12

Purpose: This assignment is designed to allow students to not only reflect on the ideas that they learned during class, but also to explain what makes those ideas important to their understanding of practice with individuals, social work, or just life in general. In professional practice, we often review client progress through looking at where they started and where they are at various points in our work with them. The process of reflection helps the client and the worker alike recognize all that has been accomplished over a period of time. It is an important part of the work we do with them. This assignment mimics that process and reinforces the learning that has taken place. We are often so focused on “what’s next” that we don’t see how much we have achieved.

Knowledge: This assignment will also help you to become familiar with the following important content knowledge in this discipline:

- Reflecting on the learning process
- Synthesizing key points of new knowledge
- Recognizing accomplishments

Task: Students will use the compiled list of things learned in each class meeting as well as the Socratic Seminar discussions and other assignments to submit a one-page (12-point font, double-spaced) reflection paper

Criteria for Success: The submission should demonstrate the student’s insights on their weekly lists of 5 things as well as discussions/assignments and summarize the meaningfulness and importance of what has been learned throughout this course.

Figure 11.6

Examples of Course Reflection Student Submission Including Instructor Comments Within Submission


Well the first thing that struck me as interesting about this compiled list of only 65 things (because I missed turning one in) was how much more in-depth and thorough it was, as it went on to be 6 pages in length, something I did not expect. Reading through each week was a sweet reminder of all the amazing things we've learned throughout the course (and year) and the immense growth I've experienced personally through my education and practice in the classroom (and outside of it!).

A couple of 'things' I noted that were of specific importance to me and that really defined the class and shaped my educational experience within it involved the overall participation required of the class this semester. I felt so much more involved through the readings, the Socratic seminars, the quizzes, etc. We really needed to be on point and be involved a 100% and it never felt daunting, boring or as if we were going through the motions. Everything was important and interesting. Some other things I noted from my list; "Communication is happening all of the time within a group" this was a beautiful reminder to be present, aware and to listen to all forms of communication, "Becoming multiculturally competent! Exploring feelings about your own identity" another incredible piece to continuously add on too, "Learn from the members!" this is another communication piece and I think through group work will help you become a better worker each time, "Conflict resolution, disagreement as an opportunity to gather info" Taking conflict and turning it into something constructive and valuable for all members of the group. These were just a few things that caught my eye but certainly don't properly reflect the deeper more intimate aspects of my learning experience during this course. I feel that I have grown tremendously in the realm of not only group work but my knowledge of the social work field and learning to apply all that I've learned to each facet of my daily life. Thank you!

Jen Evers
That's good - I hate the idea of busy work or having students do things that don't seem relevant or meaningful.

Jen Evers
Absolutely...

Jen Evers
Not easy to do but so important - even within our own personal lives! I have found that my personal and professional growth have paralleled in some ways which makes a kind c [...]

Jen Evers 
This reflection makes me want to encourage you to pursue your MSW. You demonstrate such insight in the connections you make here. I'm really impressed. You are exceptional in your ability to take ownership of your own learning and really make the most of it. Are you considering the MSW program?


I gained a lot of knowledge of individuals, social work and life situations in general. Some of these reflections are what people go through daily and I learned to be more confident on how to handle situations that may arise with future clients. What was meaningful to me is that we are all human beings, but some of us have a hard time adjusting to life, people don't know how to accept and take on feelings of themselves and others around them. The importance of social work practice is to assist and empower people. Many people of different origins have unique backgrounds, but we are the same. Reflecting on the course I learned many ways in dealing with clients who are hostile and some just needed a little guidance with resources but all have a common goal of enhancing social functioning and overall well-being.

I also gained knowledge of what is expected of me as a future social worker and knowing that each client may express their language in different ways such as religious or political beliefs and we are not to lay judgement on others. I was made aware that we as social workers can always please everyone and that we can refer clients to other therapists. The biggest mental health care you can have for yourself is self care, because you matter first and your wellbeing needs to come first to serve others. The biggest primary goal of a social worker is to help the client move forward in their life. The importance of this course gave me knowledge in how to handle clients situations of all sorts, I feel more confident in taking on whatever comes my way.

Jen Evers
Good!

Jen Evers
Nice - I love this attitude. It implies unconditional positive regard which is essential in working with others.

Jen Evers
We're all doing our best...

Jen Evers 
I think you meant to type "can't"

Jen Evers
YES!

Jen Evers
Good!

Figure 11.7

Example of Course Reflection Student Submission With Instructor Comments in Comment Box

As I have been reflecting on what I have learned over the course of this semester, I have learned a lot. I think some of the things that have stood out to me the most is the importance of the strengths perspective, meeting people where they are at, communication, and reflection.

I feel like looking at people from a strengths perspective as well as helping them see themselves from a strengths perspective is really important if we want to be able to have a positive, helping relationship. It is important that we understand that people are doing their best. It is also important to help them see the progress they are making.

If we want to be able to help people we have to meet them where they are. If we are feeling frustrated when working with clients, we need to check in with ourselves and make sure we are meeting the client where they are at, and not trying to make them meet us where we are. We have to have a level of self-awareness to make sure we are separating our wants for our clients from their wants and needs for themselves.

On page 52 of our book it says "one cannot not communicate. Activity or inactivity, words, or silence all have message value". We are always communicating with the people we interact with. We again have to be self-aware to be able to communicate acceptance and neutrality.

Throughout the semester we talked a lot about reflecting when working with our clients. As we did our role plays I could see how it was really helpful in making sure we understood what our clients were saying and feeling as well as letting them understand what messages they were giving us.

I learned a lot from this class. It has been important for my skill development and understanding of the social work practice.

Instructor Comment:

Really significant insights, (name redacted)! Your self-awareness and engagement in thinking critically about the material help you make the most of the information presented. I look forward to getting to watch you continue to grow and hone your skills next semester!

Conclusion

Grading the course reflection papers is typically a very validating experience for me and I believe it may be for students as well. I have found that my confidence in student knowledge and skills has increased significantly since implementing this assignment. Just like clients, the opportunity to look back on the experience and process its meaning and utility allows students to fully recognize the value of their own efforts and the growth they have experienced throughout the semester.

Student reflections also provide important feedback to instructors' teaching process. They prompt us to reflect on how well we conveyed what we intended—we get a sense of whether students effectively met the learning objectives established for each week as well as the entire course. We can then clarify or supplement material to ensure that the course objectives and necessary comprehension of key concepts has been achieved to an acceptable degree to enhance readiness for future courses that build upon one another. Overall, these assignments are low cost and high reward for both instructor and student.

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