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Connections for Change

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Connections for Change
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Connections for Change

As a young girl I had visions and dreams of changing the world. I didn't know how - I wasn't singularly directed or talented in a particular way - but somehow I knew I wanted to make a difference – a big difference if possible. As I aged and the realities of life imposed natural limits on my dreams and experiences, I pursued a degree in social work and ultimately found myself in academia. I still wanted to make a difference but recognized that my efforts would not dramatically change the world. With family commitments, health issues and restrictions based on my own persona, I tamped down my larger goals, but never let go of the need to influence and change. As I review my career of 40+ years, I see that the need to make a difference morphed into a more practical and realistic outlet. As an academic, I had contact with students and while I hoped to influence them in class with my passion for social work, and group work in particular, I also knew that their experiential, out-of-class interactions would likely prevail in terms of overall impact. This narrative describes two of my group work attempts to empower, connect and inspire social work students.

In 2005, I had one of those “light bulb” moments. I recognized that professional associations, the International Association of Social Work with Groups, (IASWG) in particular, need the youth, energy and enthusiasm of student involvement.

Simultaneously, social work students need the mentoring, networking, professionalism and purpose of the professional community. Students need to find their voice and their passion. In my experience, this is rarely achieved within the classroom, but perhaps

professional association involvement would empower these budding professionals and encourage their engagement with the hard work of this profession.

I threw out the idea to my classes and asked whether anyone would be interested in making a presentation at IASWG. Three students expressed interest. Each had different topic ideas and experiences, and they came from diverse backgrounds. The four of us met regularly over the summer, hashing out presentation ideas, bonding over values and aspirations, and gradually developing a sense of cohesion and mutual aid.

Ultimately, we decided to present as a group under the umbrella of “Contemporary Group Work in Action”. We traveled to the symposium in Minneapolis and experienced and debriefed collaboratively throughout the conference. Each student was prodded by the group and the instructor to think reflectively about social work practice and the unique professional commitment to improve lives. Following the symposium, two of the students and I wrote and published an article, *A critical call for connecting students and professional associations*, about the experience and our take-aways. One of the three students pursued a connection with IASWG that evolved from participant and presenter to Symposium Co-chair to Board Member and Executive Committee Member.

That initial group experience has led to yearly student participation in the IASWG Symposia from my home university. To date, there have been over 225 student presentations at the Symposia. I continue to marvel at the transformative power of this experience. I watch students prepare for and arrive at the Symposia with hesitation, anxiety and trepidation, and emerge confident, excited and motivated. While students typically begin with the perception of “being only a student” with little to offer seasoned

professionals, most struggle and explore, but ultimately create presentations that reflect their own growing voices.

While many of the students are creating individual poster presentations, they meet and are supported as a cohort by faculty, alumni presenters, and their fellow student presenters. Mentorship is available. Struggles are universalized. Students independently and collectively deal with questions of purpose, ability, and ethics, recognizing that others are similarly engaged, and buoyed by the knowledge of peers successfully completing the process and encouraging their efforts. Resources are shared by faculty members, via an online resource center populated with sample abstracts, posters, and hand-outs, and among group members themselves.

Interdependence in task accomplishment begins to emerge. As the process unfolds over the academic year, and students realize that they are not alone in their feelings and struggles, empowerment begins.

When the presentation day arrives, and students stand beside their posters, they recognize that this is the culmination of all of their hard work. As I watch and document the moment with photographs, it is clear that a transformation has occurred. The students stand tall in their professional garb and look self-assured. The receptivity of the IASWG attendees, the encouragement of their peers, and their own self-satisfaction is evident. Their empowerment is almost tangible and is reflected in the following sample feedback:

Presenting a poster at the IASWG conference was an exciting, powerful, and validating experience. How many students get the chance to share their research with acclaimed social workers from across the globe?

The conference reminded me of how wonderful the profession can be...I felt so connected and hopeful for the future of social work.

I will always remember IASWG as my first step onto the path of professional development.

Buttressed by the IASWG experience, I have more recently begun to facilitate students' attendance at Social Work Day at the U.N. This day is sponsored by two other social work professional associations – the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and a similar transformation and empowerment process occurs.

In 2018, I took my first cohort of students to U.N. Day. The dean circulated the announcement about the event, and it seemed to offer another - but different - opportunity for student engagement and empowerment. Again, I shared the information with my classes, and five students elected to attend. We arrived in New York City, none of us quite knowing what to expect. We spent two days immersed in issues of global impact. The first day was a student forum and served as an introduction to the theme of sustainability. Initially, it wasn't clear exactly how sustainability, water shortage, and climate change connected with social work practice, but as the days unfolded the connection became obvious and our horizons expanded. The impact on the students

again seemed visceral. Tired but energized, our de-briefing group dialogues reflected passion, curiosity, determination and commitment to action. As the students remarked:

The speakers/presenters... opened my eyes to global and local natural disasters and the trauma both immediate and long-term natural disasters cause. I was able to understand the role social work plays in something as large scale as climate change and infectious disease and have taken away a new and positively charged perspective.

It was empowering to be in a room full of 700 social workers who were interested in learning about a new call to action and [it] has ignited the fire within me to continue coming back year after year.

Connecting students with professional association experiences is my small attempt to change the professional world for emerging professionals, to facilitate and create impact and meaning beyond that of the traditional classroom and the somewhat isolated college/university environment. I am filled with gratitude to those organizations and those hard-working social workers who provide the structure for such connections and opportunities. These group experiences have been my attempt to throw a pebble into others' lives and make waves of connection and professional empowerment. For me, it is a path that has come full circle. I recognize that I won't change the world, but maybe, in some small way, participation in these experiences stimulates others to make the changes I could only imagine.