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# Professional Development: An MSW Course Based on Group Work Principles and Opportunities

Shirley R. Simon

*Abstract: Professional development is a critical but frequently overlooked aspect of students' education. This paper chronicles a group work-based MSW elective course that explores issues of professional identity and responsibility within a contemporary context, develops projects focused on individually-determined professional interests, and provides opportunities to participate in and present at professional conferences such as the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) Symposium. The syllabus, feedback from students, and recommendations for replication are shared.*

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## Introduction

Social work is a unique and complicated profession. Graduates of our programs face myriad societal misconceptions and faulty expectations. Moreover, emerging professionals today experience greater workloads with less supervision and onsite continuing education than in previous decades (Whitaker, Weismiller & Clark, 2006; Bergart & Simon, 2004). Yet, opportunities for professional contribution, connection, and advancement abound. The question is, "Are we adequately preparing our students with the knowledge, skills, and resources to optimize their professional development and meet professional challenges?"

The author, a faculty member at a large Midwestern social work program, grappled with this question. A review of the literature revealed a long-standing struggle with this issue in other professional fields (Cruess & Cruess, 1997; Eitzen, 1988; Heflinger & Doykos, 2016; Ledet, Esparza, & Peloquin, 2005; Ducheny et al., 1997). Even the

definition of professional development has been the subject of debate and question (Buysse, Winton, & Rous, 2009; Ducheny et al., 1997). Articles that address professional development frequently neglect to define the concept but concur that there is no one model or framework for understanding and promoting this topic (Heflinger & Doykos, 2016; Ledet, Esparza, & Peloquin, 2005).

A review of the social work literature finds little discussion of professional development. Neither the *Social Work Dictionary*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Barker, 2014) nor *the Encyclopedia of Social Work*, 20<sup>th</sup> ed. (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008) contains a definition of professional development. What is written relates to continuing professional education or efforts that take place post-graduation. The Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS, 2015) clearly address the concept that the curriculum should shape professional character and competence, but only mention professional development within the context of "implicit curriculum," referring to the beneficial effects of students participating in academic and student affairs policy-making (p.14) and the manner in which faculty demonstrate their ongoing professional development (p. 16). While a definition of professional development within the field of social work is not readily accessible and thus warrants further critical exploration, Ducheny et al. (1997) offer a definition for the field of psychology that could pertain to social work. They define professional development as "an ongoing process through which an individual derives a cohesive sense of professional identity by integrating the broad-based knowledge, skills, and attitudes within psychology [social work] with one's values and interests" (p. 89).

If students are to value and operationalize their ongoing effective professional development, shouldn't this be a deliberate component of MSW education? Since the MSW is historically the terminal degree within social work, MSW graduates should be prepared with the values, resources, and skills to embark upon and maintain their professional development. The dearth of social work literature on the professional development of social work students, the licensing and career expectations of our graduates, and the very needs of our profession and professional associations affirm the need to address this issue.

## **Background**

The author's prior efforts to link students and professional associations, to provide opportunities for students' peer reviewed presentations, and to motivate students' ongoing professional development (Simon, Webster, & Horn, 2007) led to the conclusion that both curricular and extracurricular opportunities to focus on issues of professional development are important. Given the busy and complex time commitments and obligations of the typical MSW student, extracurricular opportunities, no matter how compelling, are often ignored. The author determined that it was important to approach this issue from a curricular vantage point and began by developing a curricular module embedded in a required MSW group work course that addressed one component of this concept – professional associations and their potential opportunities for professional development. Both quantitative and qualitative assessments of this module indicated that students experienced increased knowledge of and appreciation for the role of professional associations. The module facilitated enthusiasm for the profession, provided opportunities to join professional associations, and inspired self-confidence and motivation to assume professional leadership positions (Simon, 2012; Simon & Grossman, in press).

It became clear, however, that this was only one aspect of students' well-rounded grasp of and commitment to lifelong professional development. More focused attention needed to be directed to a deeper and more holistic engagement with the concept. With the encouragement of students who had attended and presented at association conferences, the author utilized her group work expertise to design and implement a cohort model elective MSW course entitled "Professional Development." The course began as a special topics elective, evolved to be a yearly elective option, and is now a core component of a sub-specialization in group work. This paper chronicles the development of, rationale for, and group work principles that provide the framework for an MSW course on Professional Development.

## **Course Description**

This Professional Development course focuses on the student's unique development as a social work professional. It encourages reflection, assessment, and skill building aimed at creating a foundation for lifelong professional growth. The course combines elements of group cohesion, mutual aid, and task group principles to create an environment and setting that stimulates personal and professional exploration. It requires participation in a professional association conference, such as the IASWG Symposium, and incorporates a semester-long individually designed project that aims to facilitate students' next steps in their professional journeys. Course units include: the profession of social work – identity, opportunities and responsibilities; professional associations; group work, teamwork, and collaboration in professional practice; making a professional presentation; preparing and submitting a manuscript for publication; ongoing professional development; and developing a personal plan for professional development.

A primary goal of this Professional Development course is to empower students and support their shift in thinking from a passive consumer of instructor-provided information and direction to a more independent, self-motivated professional perspective. The first few course sessions are instructor led, but increasingly large components of course sessions are facilitated by students. Each of the following assignments is structured to facilitate the objectives of the course and encourage engagement and cooperative learning.

## **Course Assignments**

### **Professional Development Project**

For this assignment, students are asked to reflect upon their professional and educational experiences and identify areas for further development. With collaboration and support from instructor and

classmates, students determine and focus on one area of professional interest for the duration of the course. They identify learning objectives, develop concrete methods to achieve these objectives, and design and complete a project demonstrating outcomes. Projects range from traditional research papers, to preparing and presenting a poster at a conference, to interviewing or shadowing social workers in an area of career interest.

## **Attendance at a 2-3 day Social Work/Social Welfare Professional Conference**

This assignment requires students to learn about, participate in, and reflect upon a professional association gathering related to their career interests. Conferences selected include those sponsored by the International Association of Social Work with Groups (IASWG), National Association of Social Workers (NASW), American Group Psychotherapy Society (AGPS), Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), School Social Workers of America (ASA), American Society on Aging (ASA), International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and more.

## **Student Partnerships**

Each student is paired with a classmate of her or his choosing. These pairings have three objectives: to facilitate the completion of each partner's professional development project, to support the partner's preparation for and facilitation of a class discussion on assigned readings, and to support and enhance the partner's conference/symposium experience.

## *Presentations*

Students are assigned to deliver presentations individually and in pairs:

- Student pairs lead the class in a discussion of assigned readings.

- Each pair prepares discussion questions and a feedback form.
- Each student delivers a brief presentation to a component of the University community (a class, orientation program, alumni group etc.) about their professional expertise, the experience of participating in a professional conference/symposium, or their professional development project.
  - Each student prepares a 30 second “elevator speech” describing the profession of social work. Students present their speech to the class and to one other non-social work individual.

### *Journals*

Each student submits two journals – a reading journal and a course and conference journal:

- In the reading journal, students identify and explain their learning “take aways” and questions raised by the required course readings.
- In the course and conference journal, students reflect upon their experiences within the course and at the conference and relate these experiences to course readings and discussions.

## **Group Work Considerations and Inclusions**

The Professional Development course, facilitated seminar style, is built largely upon the following group work considerations: contracting; empowerment; safe, inclusive environment; clarity of purpose; cohesion; mutual aid; and the therapeutic/helping factors of groups.

The class itself is viewed as a group in which engagement and participation are primary. Attention is focused on creating a safe, non-hierarchical environment where diversity of opinion and experience are welcome. To facilitate engagement and enhance participation, the rationale and purpose for each of the assignments is shared. The course is predicated upon the premise that the students are adult learners entitled to understand the rationale behind each of the course expectations. Although the course structure and assignments are largely predetermined, each cohort is unique, and the course builds in flexibility near the end of the term to address the shared interests of the particular cohort. Suggestions for the focus of these

sessions – topics, speakers, field experiences – are solicited from the class, thereby highlighting the importance and desirability of student input and engagement.

During the first class sessions, a class contract is established based upon the syllabus and a discussion of verbal expectations. Inclusion and respect for one another are emphasized. Within the contracting process, the instructor clarifies the purpose of the course as a vehicle for empowering students to take charge of their own learning. Student partnerships also create written contracts to define and outline mutual expectations and communication methods. Both the class and partnership contracts are revisited and assessed toward the end of the course.

In order to begin to build community within the class, a welcome letter sharing the philosophy and structure of the course is emailed to each student prior to the first class. Within this letter, two of the major assignments – conference attendance and professional development project – are described and students are asked to bring their initial thoughts to class. A list of professional associations and their upcoming conferences is attached to this letter. During the first class, as an icebreaker, students verbally introduce themselves, identifying anticipated professional development project topics and potential conference attendance. Receiving feedback and suggestions from peers on the first day of class affirms the interdependent focus of the class. Periodically during the semester there are check-ins regarding these assignments, and students have an opportunity to hear what their peers are doing and simultaneously receive feedback. Also, an initial assignment asks students to develop and post a three to four slide PowerPoint presentation introducing themselves and their backgrounds, interests, and professional goals. Students are then asked to respond to one another's posts via online messages. When students later form semester-long partnerships, they are requested to review the presentations of their partners. Each of these assignments and subsequent interactions contribute to the development of a group cohort and a spirit of mutual aid.

Assignments and discussions are also aimed at building cohesion, empowerment, and mutual aid. While the first few sessions are instructor led, the later course sessions are increasingly facilitated by students. Structurally this is done by having self-selected pairs of students lead class discussions about the required readings. Initially, the instructor models the facilitation process, and students are then requested to follow the model. The facilitation focuses on group

engagement and discussion of relevant material rather than a lecture about the reading content. Because students are required to complete a reading journal identifying takeaways from the assigned articles prior to the class presentations, they have a working knowledge of the topics being discussed. In addition, the majority of required readings are selected because of their relevance to students' own professional development. Hence, students can be expected to be active, informed participants.

Yalom's therapeutic factors of groups (2015) are imbedded in the class and the interactions with the instructor. Universalization, instillation of hope, imparting information, cohesion, altruism, interpersonal learning, and even a bit of catharsis can be found within course interactions. Students feel a sense of being "in the same boat," as they share their academic and professional questions and concerns and their attempts to plan and to address professional aspirations. They glean hope from one another, from the sense that others are navigating similar career paths and from the specific information, opportunities, and direction provided throughout the course. Imparting information takes place didactically through readings, presentations, and individual projects, as well as interpersonally via student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions. Cohesion is typically seen as the course develops and students seek each other out both within and outside of the classroom. The language within the class often quickly transitions from "the course" and "you," to "we" and "us." Altruism evolves as participants share resources and referrals and give feedback to one another within the partnerships and in the group as a whole. Students also find it helpful to be able to vent to their peers about their struggles and frustrations within the field while simultaneously receiving support for their efforts and suggestions about next steps.

## **Outcomes**

Although long-term studies on the effectiveness of this Professional Development class have not been conducted, the initial assessments based on course evaluations, anecdotal comments, and instructor feedback appear to support its value. The student course evaluations,

spanning multiple years, consistently rank the class “outstanding.” Students comment on the course’s personal and professional relevance, the value of the professional association connection, and the cohesive seminar learning environment. Examples of these qualitative comments include:

*This course was one of the best courses that I had in the MSW program, in that the focus was on how I was developing professionally. It was relevant to my life and career now.*

*The learning style of this course was very different from other courses. It made learning specific to meet my strengths and weaknesses. It challenged and enhanced the way I see myself as a professional.*

*I appreciated the professor’s respect for us as self-directed and capable professionals. It gave me a lot of confidence moving into my professional worth.*

*The assignment to connect with a professional association and attend a conference was the richest learning experience of my coursework so far.*

*I appreciated the opportunity to direct personal learning in a way that addressed my passions and interests. The seminar format made for an enjoyable experience in which I felt heard and valuable to discussion. The professor was passionate about the topic and her enthusiasm was contagious. Overall, I thought the course provided an enriching experience which furthered my professional skills, knowledge, and confidence.*

From the instructor’s perspective, the course also appears to be effective. The students seem consistently engaged with the material and with one another, and they readily make suggestions about course activities. Their comfort with the elements of becoming a professional heightens as the course unfolds. With rare exception, the students report that the professional association conference is one of the highlights of their master’s program. It is truly a pleasure to teach this course and watch as students’ self-confidence and professional development evolve.

## **Considerations for Replication**

It is hoped that this course can be replicated or incorporated within other curricular components of social work programs. Some considerations for doing so effectively include:

- Determining whether there is an instructor comfortable with and committed to this group work based, seminar-style of teaching.
- Assessing whether this topic and approach should stand alone as a separate elective course or are best incorporated into fieldwork seminars or capstone courses.
- Reviewing the wide range of topics that pertain to the broad concept of professional development.
- Investigating funding supports for student participation in professional conferences. While students may be able to minimize costs by volunteering at conferences and/or by finding local conferences to attend, the provision of stipends or other financial supports could be helpful.

## **Conclusion**

Professional development is certainly a topic meriting further attention within social work education. Laying a foundational basis for lifelong involvement and commitment to one's professional growth and contributions is a laudable goal. Whether enrolling in a Professional Development course contributes to this goal is yet to be determined via long-term studies; nevertheless, course evaluations, self-reports and anecdotal observations attest to its value for numerous cohorts of students. As detailed within this paper, the course provides a group work-based vehicle for integrating a professional development focus within social work curricula and calls attention to this overlooked aspect of MSW students' education.

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