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# Teaching Critical Thinking in Social Work Practice Courses

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## TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE COURSES

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Social workers in direct practice rely on critical thinking to apply theories, make informed decisions, and explain their assessments and decisions. This article describes methods for teaching critical thinking to graduate and undergraduate social work students in practice courses. The authors define critical thinking, explore the skills necessary for its development, describe the methods and assignments used to teach these skills, and detail a simple pre/posttest method used to evaluate graduate students' gains in critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking skills are an important component of social work education because they are essential to good decision making, the foundation of ethical and effective clinical practice (Gambrill, 1990). This sentiment is echoed by the Council on Social Work Education (1992a, 1992b), which addresses educators' responsibility to prepare baccalaureate and graduate students to think critically about their practice--for example, to judge which interviewing and intervention techniques are best suited to each situation/client, to decide what information to use (and to ignore) in formulating an assessment, to evaluate the success of their approach, and to decide how and when to terminate the process.

Kurfiss (1989) suggests this definition for critical thinking:

The process of figuring out what to believe or not about a situation, phenomenon, problem or controversy for which no single definitive answer or solution exists. The term implies a diligent, open-minded search for understanding, rather than for discovery of a necessary conclusion. (p. 42)

This ability is important in both the classroom and the practice setting because understanding how theory can be applied to practice requires critical judgment.

### Applying Theory to Practice Decisions

Social workers tend to make practice decisions based on learned theories. In this context, a theory is simply an attempt to "answer the question 'why?'" about some aspect of reality (Chafetz, 1978). In social work practice, theories describe the reasons for behaviors and prescribe interventions for practitioners. Specifically, descriptive theories explain human behavior and lay the groundwork for prescriptive theories, which inform the practitioner's choice of approaches and methods to use.

Social workers may rely upon explicit theories learned in some formal environment or implicit theories developed from personal experience or picked up from others. The important point is that theories are not facts; they must be evaluated for their value in specific practice settings and with specific clients. Without critical thinking skills, practical application will prove difficult; students and practitioners will find themselves confused by the plethora of theories or by the complexity of applying theories to the situations that arise in practice.

It is not uncommon for students and practitioners to have a difficult time explaining their rationale for the assessment and intervention procedures they use, the intended effect of the procedures, or the evaluation of the effect (Barbour, 1984; Shulman, 1993). An example of this problem is the social worker who reports choosing an intervention such as self-disclosure because it "seemed right," but is unable to otherwise ascribe a reason or intent to this choice.

A related problem is the social worker who uses an intervention based on a particular theory, but is unaware of the theory's strengths and weaknesses. For example, a social worker using psychodynamic theory may be unaware of its weaknesses in regard to an ecological view of a client's problems. In this situation, a social worker may work on intrapsychic issues although work on environmental issues would best address the client's need.

A third problem is the social worker who clings tightly to one practice model, attempting to fit all clients into that mold. This can lead the social worker to view clients as resistant or unmotivated when they do not change as the theory prescribes.

Social work educators are in the business of teaching students how to think as social workers (Seelig, 1991), and these examples show how a lack of critical insight limits the effectiveness of assessment and intervention efforts in social work practice. This article describes methods for teaching critical thinking in graduate and undergraduate social work practice courses. Before exploring methods, however, it is important to specify the skills students should be taught.

### Critical Thinking Skills

Paul (1992) lists the following abilities components of critical thinking:

The ability to formulate, analyze, and assess the (1) problem or question at issue, (2) purpose or goal of the thinking, (3) frame of reference or points of view involved, (4) assumptions made, (5) central concepts and ideas involved, (6) principles or theories used, (7) evidence data or reasons advanced, (8) interpretations and claims made, (9) inferences, reasoning, and lines of formulated thought, and (10) implications and consequences that follow. (p. 11)

Knight (1992) offers a list of skills necessary for critical thinking that includes the development of cogent arguments, clear definitions, problem-solving strategies, information organization, and creativity. Kurfiss (1989) notes that, to think critically, the student needs both discipline-specific knowledge and procedural knowledge (knowledge about how to develop an argument).

This article focuses on five interrelated skills that promote critical thinking for social workers:

1. The ability to understand social work theories.
2. The ability to divide a theory into its components (assumptions, concepts, propositions, hypotheses, etc.).
3. The ability to assess the practice implications of a theory.
4. The ability to develop and apply criteria for evaluating a theory.
5. The ability to identify common errors in reasoning.

These skills should be taught by introducing students to critical thinking skills, teaching students how to evaluate the theories that guide social work practice, and using assignments that require students to use critical thinking skills.

### Introducing Students to Critical Thinking Skills

## Graduate Students

Instructors can introduce critical thinking to graduate students in the first class of the practice course using an approach similar to the one described here.

Students are asked to spend ten minutes writing about their clinical practice, which includes giving responses to the following: Describe your last clinical session. Which theory(ies) do you subscribe to and why? The students then discuss what they wrote in small groups, highlighting the theories, assumptions, skills, practice wisdom, and techniques that they use in practice. A subsequent large group discussion (or lecture, depending on the knowledge base of the class) covers the vast number of theories and values in the social work profession, describes and defines critical thinking skills, and examines the importance of critical thinking in practice. This initial class exercise lets students know that they will be called upon to justify and evaluate their practice and the practice of others.

Subsequently, students are given reading assignments to increase their understanding of the components and purposes of prescriptive and descriptive social work theories. Potential reading assignments include Blalock (1969), Chafetz (1978), Gambrell (1990), Payne (1991), and Witkin and Gottschalk (1988).

Primarily through lectures, students are taught the purposes of theory (predicting outcomes, understanding client problems, organizing learning, and guiding research), the major components of theory (assumptions, paradigms, concepts, classifications, propositions, and hypotheses), the differences between descriptive and prescriptive social work theories, and how each kind should guide social work practice. In-class discussions ensue on the need to think critically about applying theory to practice and the potential consequences to both client and practitioner of accepting a particular theory or practice model "on faith."

## **Undergraduate Students**

Baccalaureate-level students should also be introduced to critical thinking early in the practice course via a module on social work values. Although professional values provide the foundation for decision making in practice, they do not always guide practitioners to a specific decision (Zastrow, 1995). Value dilemmas expose students to the idea that in some cases there are no prescribed right answers--rather, that a critical process is necessary to develop a desirable course of action.

For this module, students are given readings on the values and ethics of social work (e.g., Zastrow, 1995). Classroom time is then used for a small group exercise in which students are given a list of seven practice dilemmas that have a value or ethical dilemma at their core, such as the following:

Does a social worker have an obligation to preserve confidentiality if an HIV-positive client refuses to inform his/ her sexual partner of the infection (while persisting in behavior that puts the person at risk), or does the social worker have an obligation to warn the partner of the peril? (Zastrow, 1995, p. 70)

Students are divided into groups of four to six and are asked to discuss the dilemmas and to develop responses and rationales for the responses. Each group then presents its responses and rationales to the entire class.

The importance of this exercise for critical thinking lies in having the students provide rationales for their responses. Students need to be able to develop and articulate reasons for practice decisions. During the large group discussion, the instructor gently challenges illogical reasoning and supports well-developed arguments. For example, one student felt he would notify the partner in the above dilemma because his field instructor suggested it to be the best approach based on a case from her practice experience. The class benefited by discussing how one case may not be a representative sample and thus may not present a strong argument for the position. Inevitably, this exercise demonstrates that there is rarely one absolutely right answer and that good ideas can conflict with one another.

Students are subsequently shown how good decisions are based on logical reasoning, and poor decisions on faulty reasoning, using the "Reasoning in Practice" games developed by Gibbs and Gambrill (1996, specifically Game B).[1]

In the class prior to the game, the students are given a list of fallacies to read and review. This list includes a description of each fallacy, an example of each fallacy, and potential countermeasures (Gibbs & Gambrill, 1996). The fallacies included are: ad hominem (at the person), ad verecundium (appeal to authority), diversion, stereotyping, groupthink, bandwagon, either-or, and straw man argument. (For a full description and discussion of each fallacy, the reader is referred to Gibbs and Gambrill, 1996, or Gibbs, 1991).

The game is played by first having students read or act out scenarios (provided in the game) in which exist a potential fallacy of reasoning. The students are then divided into teams of four to six to decide, first individually and then through small group discussion, if a fallacy has in fact been illustrated in the scenario. Points are awarded to teams providing the most cogent support for their decisions. Through this process of exploration and problem solving, students not only are introduced to fallacies of reasoning at a conceptual level, but are required to apply this knowledge in an interactive way.

### [Critical Evaluation of Theories](#)

## **Graduate Students**

Graduate students are taught how to evaluate theories using several activities. First, they are provided with an outline for evaluating theories drafted from Chafetz's (1978) work on theory development (see Figure 1). The questions in this outline are used to evaluate the first theory examined in the class. As the students gain the ability to do this work, however, they are required, as a class, to develop their own evaluation instrument. This is accomplished by having each student develop three or four criteria (in the form of questions) that they find most

important for theory evaluation. The instructor then develops a composite instrument from all the students' questions (see Figure 2). This tool is considered a working document for students to use and adapt throughout the semester.

Graduate students evaluate multiple theories during the semester. After the first week's discussion on critical thinking and exploration of theories in social work practice, the students are asked to decide, as a group, which theories they want to learn about. (We have found that covering four to six theories in a typical 15-week semester works best.) Each unit starts with a lecture about the theory and its assumptions. The second part is a discussion and demonstration of the practice applications of the theory (e.g., students prepare process recordings incorporating the techniques; students role play techniques; students watch videotapes illustrating the techniques; students identify techniques provided in the process recordings, role plays, and videotapes). The final part is a critical analysis of the theory. In this unit and throughout the term, students are encouraged to discuss experiences from their field placements to aid in learning, understanding, and evaluating all theories covered.

After the students choose the theories they want to cover during the course, each elects either to give a presentation explaining a theory or to demonstrate its application. They are challenged to illustrate their chosen theory using their own work. The instructor then develops a schedule of topic coverage (in which the instructor handles any material not selected by students) and a list of reading assignments. Students are assigned both primary and secondary sources on each selected theory to help them understand the difference between an original theory and others' interpretations of it.

During the first week of each unit, a student or the instructor presents the assumptions, terms, and concepts of the theory under analysis. The instructor gives students an outline the week before each unit begins (see Figure 3 for an example) to help them organize their thoughts around related readings. By coming to class prepared, students are better able to discuss and evaluate theories, engage in participatory learning, and develop their critical thinking skills. They spend more class time on evaluating theory and less on digesting "known facts." As Knight (1992) points out: "[Students] can learn facts on their own, but they cannot learn higher-order thinking skills and applications of principles of our disciplines on their own; so that is where we are obliged to devote instructional time" (p. 71).

Students discuss the theory's historical perspective, assumptions, logical flaws, usefulness for assessment and/or intervention, overall strengths and weaknesses, and potential practice dilemmas.

**Historical Perspective.** Discussing the theory's history provides a valuable perspective for the students. For example, when discussing the history of the medical model with the students, the instructor described the National Conference on Charities and Corrections at which Dr. A. Flexner stated that social work could not become a profession until social workers made changes in the way they approached clients and their problems (Flexner, 1915). It was after this conference that social workers adopted the medical model of assessment and intervention--at least in part to legitimize their professional status. Students discussed how this model has affected our profession, and how seeking

outside professional validation continues to influence it today. Thus students recognized the importance of historical perspective in understanding and resolving theory-based practice dilemmas.

**Assumptions.** Discussion of the theory's assumptions helps students discover both explicit and implicit premises. To initiate this discussion, an instructor might ask: How does this theory view the client? How does it view human nature? How does it define the role of the social worker and the client? What does it assume about the change process? What does it prescribe for helping clients change? Answering these questions helps students to think critically about the premises that undergird the theory and to identify areas of faulty reasoning within the theory.

**LogicalFlaws.** By discussing whether or not the theory's assumptions are logical, how they may contradict those of other theories, and how they fit with the mission of social work, students explore the potential for errors in reasoning. These include relying solely on case examples, relying on testimonials, accepting vague arguments, relying on newness or tradition, accepting uncritical documentation, and focusing only on successes (Gibbs & Gambrill, 1996).

**Usefulness in Practice.** Discussing how a theory is intended to be used helps students examine the theory's applications for their own practice. Any secondary research on the theory should be explored in the process of evaluating the utility of the theory. Discussing utility is often the "hook" for students, especially those who tend to be concrete thinkers; it helps them understand the relevance not only of the theory itself, but of analyzing theories. An examination of utility usually leads to a discussion of the theory's strengths and weaknesses, which is a good time to refer back to the evaluation instrument.

**Strengths and Weaknesses.** Using the instrument developed in class (see Figure 2) allows students to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the theory under analysis, and to compare theories for potential benefit given specific problems, clients, or settings. Conducting this level of analysis is critical for practice professionals, who must decide which theories are most relevant to which situations.

This interactive evaluation process also encourages students to listen to and assess their "colleagues'" contributions. Students often challenge their classmates' reasoning and assumptions. During the evaluation of cognitive-behavioral theory, for example, some students expressed their belief that the model does not allow for warmth or empathy--a belief probably fostered by the unit's focus on specific techniques. Students who made presentations on this theory countered with information on the assumptions and concepts that frame the cognitive-behavioral model, and the ensuing discussion brought the class to a much greater understanding of the theory itself, and of their increased ability to analyze and think critically about all social work theory.

**Practice Dilemmas.** The discussion of practice dilemmas allows students to demonstrate their understanding of the theory and some potential problems in applying it to specific problems, clients, or settings. It also furthers students'



ability to see the benefits and drawbacks of using various practice models, and to get beyond the notion that flaws render a theory useless. By examining the relationship of theory analysis to practice dilemmas, students better understand the value of critical thinking in professional practice.

## **Undergraduate Students**

For undergraduate students, a condensed and simplified version of the graduate-level process is used. The instructor covers seven key social work theories: ecological, psychosocial, problem solving, behavioral, family centered, task centered, and cognitive-behavioral. The instructor's objectives are to increase students' knowledge base on social work theory and to provide enough information for students to analyze and compare theories.

Each theory is presented through readings, lectures, and class discussion. Because lectures are not considered the most powerful tool for teaching critical thinking (Paul, 1992), each is immediately followed by discussion focusing on how theories define particular concepts, how a theory views the client, how it prescribes interventions, and how it fits with the ethics or values of social work. Teaching multiple theories at this stage reinforces the concept that multiple assessment and intervention techniques may be effective in any given situation.

After exploring these theories, the students are introduced to the components of a theory. For this course, an abbreviated version of Chafetz's (1978) categories is used, focusing on assumptions, concepts, propositions, and hypotheses. After defining these terms, the class reviews the theories learned in class and identifies their components. A primary objective is to have students understand that theoretical assumptions are open to question and discussion; a secondary objective is to reinforce students' ability to think critically about each theory.

The final stage in studying multiple theories is to examine criteria for evaluating them. For this, students are given an abbreviated version of the criteria created by Chafetz (1978; see Figure 1). Class time is spent discussing professional knowledge about specific theories, the strengths and weaknesses of the theories on the items in the evaluation criteria, and ways to discern the value of theories for application to social work practice. As students learn how to assess practice theories, they develop general evaluation skills. Instructors must remember that this might be the first attempt for many of these undergraduate students to evaluate a theory. Many will not do it well, but the primary purpose at this point is to help students appreciate the importance of thinking critically about theories and models they use in practice.

### [Class Assignments](#)

Because individual, didactic, and group participation methods are used to examine and assess practice theory in the graduate-level course, all students have hands-on opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. Examples of

assignments other than those previously discussed include small group theory-driven case assessments and critical analysis of theory assumptions--especially their level of heterosexist, racist, or sexist bias.

The graduate students' presentation/ demonstration assignment may include sharing case studies from their field placements; illustrating practice approaches through videotapes or in-class demonstrations of assessment and intervention techniques; discussing the assumptions of particular theories and their applicability to certain client groups; or developing role plays for the class that integrate theory and practice.

Written assignments are used in the undergraduate-level class to help students with the critical thinking process. Two of the written assignments are especially pertinent to this discussion: a weekly journal and a final paper that integrates students' field experiences with course content. The journal is intended to give students a forum for expressing their opinions and presenting theory-based rationales for or against decisions they made or stances they took. It is also intended to give instructors a weekly opportunity to respond to students' thinking. The final paper assignment requires that students formally present a case from their field placement and describe what they did and why they did it. This assignment also challenges undergraduate students to think critically about their practice by evaluating the theories that influence their practice decisions.

### Evaluation of Learning

A simple pre-test and post-test method is used to evaluate the graduate students' gains in critical thinking skills. During the first class session, students are asked to describe the theoretical frameworks that guide their practice and their rationales for using these approaches; during the final class, students repeat the exercise. The evaluation of learning is based on a comparison of the pre- and post-tests on the following criteria:

- Is the student able to label and describe his or her theoretical framework?
- Is the student able to evaluate the theoretical framework?
- Is the student able to clearly explain the rationale for using this framework?
- Has the student included his or her personal assumptions for using this framework?
- Is the student able to describe practice examples and dilemmas of relevance to the theoretical framework?

In addition, the instructor evaluates learning on the degree to which the student integrates course content into the final paper.

On the pre-test, most graduate students reported that they were "eclectic" in their practice approaches. Some were unable to identify the theories that comprised their theoretical framework, and most were unable to discuss either the assumptions on which the theories were based or their rationale for using the theories (other than having some familiarity with them). By the end of the semester, however, all students were able to articulate the major theoretical framework that guided their work, their rationale for choosing that theory, the assumptions of the theory, and their practice dilemmas in interpreting and using the theory. In their final paper, they were able to explicate their assessment and intervention procedures, their rationale for using these procedures, the intended effect of the procedures, and their evaluation of the effect.

No formal evaluation tools have been used to measure learning in the undergraduate course beyond noting changes in students' journals and their performance on exams and papers over the semester. These assessments have consistently illustrated students' development of critical thinking skills, but more formal evaluations are needed.

An important next step for social work educators will be to develop qualitative and quantitative tools for assessing students' critical thinking skills in other curriculum areas, and for determining which teaching methods are most successful in promoting critical analysis.

This article is based on a paper presented at the Council on Social Work Education's Annual Program Meeting, March 1995, San Diego, CA.

1 A special thanks to Eileen Gambrill and Leonard Gibbs for sending a copy of this game and giving their permission to use it. In the assignment, the game rules were slightly adapted: Multiple groups were allowed to compete, rather than just two groups, and groups who had initial consensus on the scenario were allowed to discuss and rethink their answers.

#### Figure 1. Chavetz's Guidelines for Theory Evaluation

1. What is the explanatory power of the theory? Does the theory do a good job of explaining the known facts about the empirical phenomena in question? Are there a large number of relevant facts that the theory cannot account for?
2. Is the theory stated in such a way that it is readily amenable to empirical testing? Is the theory falsifiable through research?
3. Are the assumptions clearly defined?
4. Are the assumptions clear or implicit? Are they reasonable ones to make?

5. Are the concepts clearly defined and used in a manner consistent with their definitions? Are they unidimensional? Are classifications logical and do they follow the rules of mutual exclusive/all inclusive?
6. Does the list of concepts include any which are minimum terms, or does the theory reduce the subject matter to that of another discipline by using only borrowed terms?[a]
7. Does it appear possible to create valid operationalizations for the major concepts in the theory?
8. How precisely is the nature of the explanations spelled out? Are the linkages between concepts clear or ambiguous?
9. How parsimonious are the statements of the theory, especially the list of propositions?[a]
10. Is the logic within the theory consistent or are there internal contradictions?
11. Is the theory ethically consistent with the values of the profession?

a Not used with undergraduates Source: Chafetz, J. (1978).

#### Figure 2. Class-Generated Guidelines for Theory Evaluation

1. According to this theory, what determines human behavior?
2. What are the major tenets of the theory? Which tenets do I accept and why? Which tenets don't I accept and why?
3. Are the assumptions clearly defined? Are the assumptions reasonable? Are the theory's assumptions ethically and socially consistent with my own and social work's assumptions?
4. Can the principles of the theory be practically applied?
5. How applicable is the theory across settings, different clients, and problems?
6. Is the theory clear, easy to understand, and logical?
7. Does the theory address cultural, ethnic, or racial issues? Is the theory culturally sensitive?
8. What is the empirical support for the theory?
9. Is the theory original?

8. How does the theory compare and contrast with other theoretical approaches?

Figure 3. Example of Learning Outline

## **Cognitive-Behavioral**

I. Definition of Social Casework

II. Historical Overview

III. Major Principles of Cognitive-Behavioral While reading this page, keep in mind a client whose actions you cannot understand. After reading this, do you have any fuller understanding of the client ?

IV. Knowledge Base for Social Workers

V. Social Work Process (Theoretical)

VI. Application to Social Work (Practical) A. View of the Client

B. View of Social Workers

C. View of the Method/Process

i. What is the problem?

ii. What are the goals?

iii. Reaching goals

a. Admit feelings b. Teach insights c. Confrontation d. Indoctrination e. Reeducation

f. Detecting Irrational Beliefs VII. Assessment of Theory

VII. Assessment of Theory

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