

Teaching Ethics through Self-Reflective Journaling

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Abstract

This article introduces and explores the usefulness of Self-Reflective Journaling (SRJ) as a means of actively engaging social work students in the learning process of ethical resolution. After a brief review of the literature on self-reflective writing, the article outlines the approach adopted by a second-year assistant professor at a small, rural, undergraduate program. Passages from students' reflective writing assignments for this course are provided to illustrate how they approached the assignments and their overall view of the course experience. The article concludes that this approach to teaching ethics and moral philosophy is beneficial from both an instructor and a student perspective, because it encourages active student participation, critical thought and application, and writing skills development.

Key Words: Self-reflective journaling; social work; ethics; SRJ

Introduction

Social work courses focus on preparing students for the field practicum experience and, ultimately, for professional practice. Infused in these courses are content areas on values, ethics, spirituality, research, policy, human behavior, theory, and practice skills. Implicit in the development of practice skills and ethical responsiveness is a degree of self-awareness. Social work students, academicians, and practitioners must be aware of their ethical code, moral boundaries, attitudes, and value system so that they may effectively work with diverse populations. The social work curriculum is structured to enhance and encourage this self-awareness. Students are expected to develop the ability to reflect on their value systems, models of practice, theoretical frameworks leading their practice, and their own moral struggles.

The social work profession is built upon an ethical code that sets forth a standard of practice. The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2000) focuses

primarily on ethical practice within our profession at the micro, macro, mezzo, and international levels. As such, this Code guides the professionalism of our practitioners.

According to Marsh (2003), our “profession is defined by the tasks we accomplish; the problems we solve; as well as the knowledge, skills, and values we bring to bear to solve those problems” (p. 5). Reamer (1998) points out that “ethical issues have always been at the foreground of social work practice and that throughout our historical development we have been concerned with matters of right and wrong and matters of duty and obligation” (p. 489). Advances in technology and information dissemination have also fostered an evolution of the profession’s Code (Reamer, 2001). As a result, the educational experience addressing such ethical issues as client confidentiality, Internet messaging, e-mail retrieval and submission, and fax machine usage, is also evolving. A review of the literature shows that social work ethics curricula focus on preparing our students to identify ethical dilemmas, apply appropriate theoretical frameworks, and protect themselves as practitioners from complaints and legal recourse (Dickson, 1998; Loewenberg, Dolgoff, & Harrington, 2005; Madden, 2003; NASW, 2000; Osman & Perlin, 1994; Reamer, 1999, 2001a, 2005; Stein, 2004). Black, Congress, and Strom-Gottfried (2002) have also published a curriculum resource guide on various approaches for including ethics content in the curriculum, course assignments, classroom exercises, handouts, and reading lists. In addition, NASW (1998) also provides a book with examples of ethical controversies and considerations in resolving them. These available resources provide educators with a variety of models of ethical decision-making methods from which to choose to engage the student (Congress, 1998; Joseph, 1985; Lowenberg & Dolgoff, 1996; Mattison, 2000; Reamer, 1993).

Sadly, though, even with these available resources, there remains a great divide between the conventional and the creative lecturers regarding ways to enhance the learning experience. The conventional method of instruction is the “I lecture-you listen” approach. The creative method of instruction incorporates a multitude of approaches: modified lecture format, problem-based learning, case vignettes, writing assignments, small group discussion, journaling, role-playing, student-led presentations, and critical debate. To be honest, however, the mode of information delivery is useless unless the student actively engages in the learning process. What is useful is how the instructor utilizes those available resources to engage the student to achieve the learning objectives. According to the research, social work academicians are not utilizing these resources

to the best of their ability. Boland-Prom and Anderson (2005) point out that “while progress has been made in social work education and training on ethics, more effort is needed” (p. 495). Dodd and Jansson’s (2004) research also points out two pivotal findings in their review of ethics curricula in social work programs: 1) whereas social work practitioners are trained in how to recognize ethical dilemmas and become involved in their resolution, they are not fully invited to participate in the process as equals, and 2) the training they received did relate to their awareness and desire to participate in the ethical resolution process, but they had not been trained in *how* to engage themselves in the resolution process.

To train students in how to engage themselves in the resolution process, we must train them first in the classroom. One effective method that actively and responsibly engages students in the learning process is the Learning-Centered Paradigm (McManus, 2001). This method has proven effective in situating students at the center of the learning experience, motivating and empowering students to assume responsibility for their own learning. The instructor also takes responsibility by adopting teaching techniques specifically designed to encourage students to see themselves as active thinkers and problem-solvers. Clinchy (1995, p. 100) posits that in conventional pedagogy (I lecture, you listen) students are often pressured to “defend their knowledge rather than exhibit their thinking.” King (1995) contends that students need to learn how to think critically by constantly questioning, analyzing, and reviewing the world and environment around them. Seeler, Turnwall, & Bull (1994) encourage academicians to integrate innovative teaching techniques in the classroom that take students out of the passive role and place them in an active, thinking mode during their learning experience. One way to achieve active learning is through the use of SRJ.

Self-Reflective Journaling Defined

Dewey (1933) defines reflective thought as “an active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). Dewey contends that the purpose of this type of thinking is to achieve a goal and that the thought process is active and purposeful. An important and implicit element in learning is the capacity to be reflective. Studies show that learning is likely to be deeper or more connected to practice when it includes reflection, the ability to connect new information with personal meaning or past experience (Smith, 2005). Johns (1995) considers reflective writing part of the learning process, and both Andrews (1996) and Durgahee (1996) posit

that reflective writing encourages critical thought and application. Gardner's (2001) research also found that reflective writing is indeed effective with social work students, increasing their ability to recognize and articulate their own values and attitudes and exposing them to new ideas, new knowledge, new avenues of critical thought, and new ways to critically problem solve. Tsang (2003) also found that self-reflective journaling as a coursework assignment fostered critical reflectivity over time and promoted understanding of theory.

Self-reflective journaling (SRJ) compels the student to actively think about a feeling, event, behavior, emotion, or action and to record those thoughts. SRJ writing focuses on the process of learning rather than the product of learning, providing valuable educational benefits (Conner-Green, 2000; Croxton & Berger, 2001; Hyers, 2001). This method of writing increases student awareness of both *what* they are learning and *how* they are learning (Voss, 1988). Dart, Boulton-Lewis, Brlwolee, and McCrindle (1998) found that as students practiced introspective writing, their reflection and insight become more analytical and the quality of their writing also improved.

Benefits of SRJ include presenting students with an opportunity to make sense of their own personal histories, stories, and life events (Hedlund, Furst, & Foley (1989), and the increased ability to remember concepts they have learned in the classroom for a longer period (Croxton & Berger, 2001). Additional benefits included improved exam and research paper scores (Connor-Greene, 2000; Hyers, 2001), increased awareness and knowledge of critical analysis and application (Hettich, 1990), increased levels of student-teacher trust (Lohman & Schwalbe, 1996), and increased cognitive development and affect (Lohman & Schwalbe, 1996).

Paul and Elder (2005) propose that in order for reflective writing to be effective, guidelines must be followed, and students must be disciplined in their efforts. They state, "if students are to learn, they must write" (p. 40). They suggest that instructors provide a brief overview of the foundations of substantive writing, explain the idea of self-reflection, provide examples to the students of entries written by the instructor, and discuss appropriate topic areas for the writing assignment. They also stress that a student cannot be both "a skilled thinker and a poor writer" (p.40) and that it is the instructor's responsibility to help the student transition from the perspective of learning to write to the perspective of writing to learn.

Self-Reflective Journaling in the Profession

In many areas of practice, clinicians ask clients to keep logs and journals, preparing narrative accounts of their activities, thoughts, emotions, and feelings. Clients find that keeping a journal or log helps them “increase their understanding and awareness of the factors contributing to their presenting problem” (Berlin & Marsh, 1993, p. 99). The same is true for the social work student. CSWE (2003) mandates graduates of social work programs be able to:

- 1) apply critical thinking skills within the context of professional practice.
- 2) understand the value base of the profession and its ethical standards and practice; accordingly,
- 3) become aware of their own personal values and possess the ability to analyze ethical dilemmas and the ways in which they affect practice, services, and clients (pp. 33-34).

In many programs of study, students are required to keep a journal or daily log during their field practicum experience. This student journal serves the same purpose as the client journal: to increase understanding and awareness through critical and reflective thought on events, thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Case Study

The purpose of the integration of SRJ in a social work core course was threefold: 1) to help students learn the process of ethical problem solving, 2) to help students explore the dimension of ethical dilemmas and how personal biases are related to the problem-solving process, and 3) to provide a safe environment for students to explore ethical issues. Upon Institutional Review Board Approval, the course selected to integrate SRJ was Social Work with At-Risk Populations in the fall of 2004, with 24 students enrolling (17 social work majors, 3 business majors, 2 education majors, and 2 interdisciplinary studies majors). The course focused on cultural competence and ethical practice with diverse populations, discrimination, prejudice, oppression, social and economic justice, distributive justice, and theory. Key objectives spelled out in the Learning Outcomes (see Table I) encouraged students to become actively involved in this classroom experience, rather than passively reacting to the information at exam and research paper time. The content of the course, examination of different approaches, perspectives, and ideologies, also made the SRJ approach possible. The teaching/learning pedagogy adopted for this class was based on lectures as the key mode of delivery and a structured bibliography. Lectures were prepared and delivered using PowerPoint presentations, and WEBCT was used to support the course.

On successful completion of this course, students should have:

1. Knowledge and understanding of the main ingredients of ethical, strengths-based, generalist approaches to social work practice,
2. Understanding of the value base of the profession and its ethical standards and principles,
3. Knowledge of practice methods which do not discriminate,
4. Respect, knowledge, and practice skills related to clients' age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation,
5. Ability to use communication skills differently across client populations,
6. Awareness of personal values and ability to develop, demonstrate, and promote values of the profession,
7. Knowledge of methods to analyze ethical dilemmas and the ways in which these affect practice, service, and clients,
8. Understanding, affirmation, and respect for people from diverse backgrounds,
9. Ability to recognize diversity within and between groups,
10. Knowledge of methods to identify ways group membership influences access to resources,
11. Understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global connectedness of oppression (CSWE, 2003, p. 33-34).

Students were instructed to process through self-reflective writing: 1) feelings and emotions, 2) thoughts, 3) behaviors leading to and following the incident, 4) their personal value system, 5) approaches they would utilize now to work toward resolving the ethical dilemma, and 6) an overall analysis of the incident, drawing from their classroom discussion, a review of the *Code of Ethics*, and their increased level of knowledge and/or maturity since the incident. This process usually took about 45 minutes. The journals were then submitted to the instructor for review, with the understanding that grading was to be based on critical thought and application, not technical presentation.

The purpose of this course was to focus the students on studying material throughout the semester, rather than reading for exam purposes only. Each week, they were to work through an ethical dilemma which focused on the population-at-risk we had just discussed. After students had prepared for classroom discussion through readings and participated in class discussion and activities, they were then provided with a case vignette on an ethical challenge related to the population we had just discussed. Class was then dismissed, usually about 30-45 minutes early, and they were instructed to go to the computer lab on campus and write for about 45 minutes on 1) their reactions to the case vignette (thoughts, feelings, ideas), 2) applicable standards in the

NASW *Code of Ethics* that would be helpful in working toward resolution of the problem, and 3) reflections on how they synthesized the information from the readings, the lecture, the case vignette, and the *Code of Ethics* to help them become more effective and ethical students for field practicum.

Writing Assignment Structure

At the beginning of the semester, students were told that each week they should be able to complete this assignment independently of other students and that each entry should be no less than one typed page. Students were also provided with a writing assessment rubric to help them understand the content that would be assessed in this writing assignment.

Reflective Writing Evaluation Descriptors

Mark (%) Comment

80–100 This assignment shows an outstanding ability to take information from the readings, lecture, class discussion, and class activities and apply it appropriately when working toward the resolution of an ethical dilemma. Your ability to identify appropriate ethical standards of practice found in the NASW *Code of Ethics* and apply them to a case vignette is exceptionally strong. Your reflective writing exhibits a high level of insightfulness and introspection, explaining how you will use this information (readings, lecture material, class discussion, and *Code of Ethics*) to enhance your professionalism in social work. Wonderful work! I am glad you are learning!

50-79 This assignment shows a strong ability to take information from the readings, lecturer, class discussion, and class activities and apply them appropriately toward the resolution of an ethical dilemma. Your ability to identify appropriate ethical standards of practice found in the NASW *Code of Ethics* is adequate at best. There is room for improvement if you and I work together outside of class. Your reflective writing skills exhibit a limited level of insightfulness and introspection and do not adequately explain how you will use this information (readings, lecture material, class discussion, and *Code of Ethics*) to enhance your professionalism in social work. I know this is not your best work! Let's meet after this class to find out what areas we should work on.

20-49 This assignment shows a weak ability to take information from the readings, lecturer, class discussion, and class activities, and apply them appropriately toward the resolution of an ethical dilemma. Your ability to identify appropriate ethical standards of practice found in the NASW *Code of Ethics* is weak at best. There is room for improvement if you and I work together outside of class. Your reflective writing skills exhibit a serious deficiency in your level of insightfulness and introspection, and do not adequately explain how you will use this information (readings, lecture material, class discussion, and *Code of Ethics*) to enhance your professionalism in social work. A referral to the writing center has been made, and we need to schedule a meeting outside of the class to discuss these matters further.

0 – 19 This assignment shows a lack of understanding of the assignment. This assignment shows an inability to take information from the readings, lecturer, class discussion, and class activities and apply them appropriately toward the resolution of an ethical dilemma. Your ability to identify appropriate ethical standards of practice found in the *NASW Code of Ethics* is lacking. The writing assignment you have completed lacks substance, introspection, and insightfulness. There is no material that is relevant to the topic. The *NASW Code of Ethics* was not reviewed nor was it applied correctly, if at all. A referral has been made to the writing lab on your behalf. No further reflective writing assignments can be submitted until this one is revised and resubmitted. We need to schedule a meeting outside of class to discuss these matters further.

Students were provided with a sample reflective writing assignment that the instructor had developed in order to help them understand how they might set about writing the document.

Student Approach

Most students went to the computer lab directly after class to type their assignments. Students were instructed to use current APA format on the assignment, but the content, style, and approach were left to the discretion of the student. The typical assignment length of entry was about two full pages, double-spaced, and there was no obvious association between quality and length, although the assignments with more introspection were lengthier than those that provided minimal requirements for the assignment.

Each student had his or her own writing style. Some students began their entries with an integration of lecture and reading learned, while others wrote directly about the case vignette. Other students began their entries focusing on the case vignette and then drawing on lecture and reading material to work toward resolution, and then concluded with reflections on the overall experience. From the instructor perspective, reading the different student writing styles was both frustrating and refreshing, but free style writing also encourages students to express what is most important for them in their learning experience.

Students also varied the style format, as they had varied both content and structure. The majority of assignments were written in present tense, active voice, placing the student in the here and now. Students were reminded throughout the semester that they were able to write in any style, on any content areas, and with whichever structure they felt most comfortable. Very few students deviated from their original assignment style, unless encouraged to do so by me as a result of their low performance.

Content

Students were given great freedom in their choice of what content they thought most appropriate to write about from the lecture, readings, and class discussions. Some students wrote about what they found interesting in the lecture or the readings, while others wrote more information on the ethical standards of practice. Many students wrote about their struggles to work toward resolution of the ethical problem, as they were now more aware of populations-at-risk and becoming culturally competent. Many students wrote that they felt unprepared and unqualified to apply ethical standards to problems, but this mindset quickly changed as the course progressed. Students were encouraged to write about the content areas they had the most problems with and explain why they found that content difficult to master. These entries proved insightful to the instructor in that a review of material, along with additional readings and examples, was then placed on WEBCT for further study. Students also wrote honestly about particular client populations with whom they would feel uncomfortable practicing (gays, transgenders, disabled). For example, Student A wrote, "I could never work with gays or lesbians, because I don't believe it is a moral lifestyle." This provided me with an opportunity to review cultural competence and values of the profession.

Students also wrote honestly about challenges with other students. For example, Student B wrote, "I don't understand some of the things that Student ABC says in class...she definitely has a chip on her shoulder about men. She male bashes all the time. I hope she doesn't have to work with any men in her job or have any male clients." Students also wrote about difficulties with stressful events they themselves had experienced pertaining to ethical decision making. Student C wrote, "About a month ago, I really needed money to fix my car, and there it was, \$180 in the petty cash drawer at my office. We are supposed to use that money to buy clothes and things for the children at the shelter...but there it was...right there in front of me." These entries also allowed me to visit the values of the profession and address these issues in the next class meeting. From this perspective, reflective writing offered an opportunity for further self-examination. Students were able to write about the event, reflect on their actions, and move past them.

Self-Reflective Writing Excerpts

The writing assignments themselves provided an in-depth explanation of: 1) approaches to writing tasks, 2) ability to assimilate course content, 3) ability to critically apply course content to

ethical problem solving, and 4) reflection on the learning process. The following writing assignment excerpts provide an overview of student reactions to the course, the case vignettes, and their overall learning experience.

As this course was an open elective, and some students had no prior experience with reflective writing, some were able to grasp the concept of reflective writing more quickly than others. Social work majors and education majors were familiar with this type of writing assignment, as it is often used within their profession (client logs, journaling). Business majors, however, struggled diligently throughout the first weeks of the semester.

Students were often frustrated in the beginning, because learning how to write their thoughts and feelings down in an academic manner (meaning that there had to be clarity, conciseness, and cohesiveness to the thought process just so that it would make sense to the reader) was a learning process itself. As one student (D) suggested, “Self-reflective writing is hard work--I had to learn how to write down my thoughts so they would make sense to someone other than me.” Students explained that during class discussions, self-reflection was difficult because primarily they had to figure themselves out to begin the assignment. The most interesting assignments I read were those written by students who were working through frustration of learning who they were and who they were becoming.

Their transformation was happening on paper. Student E wrote, “My next-door neighbor asked me to tell her some ‘gossip’ about a client of mine at DHS. I didn’t really know what to say and so I lied and told her I didn’t know anything. Now I understand that the ethical code protects my clients, and now I can explain that. It’s like I have my profession backing me up. Now I feel like *I* can protect my clients.”

Students initially reacted to the weekly reflective writing assignment with both fear and excitement. Most students explained that they had kept journals in courses before, but nothing quite this structured. Many students asked for specific directions on how to set up the assignment so that the format would be correct from the very beginning of the course. Over the course of the semester, the majority of students developed their own unique writing style, usually very effectively.

Initial discomfort was voiced in a number of ways. Sometimes it reflected uncertainty about what was required—Student G, for example, wrote on his first assignment, “I am unsure

exactly what I should be writing. I just know I am supposed to be focusing on my readings, class lecture, and this case vignette---and exactly how honest am I supposed to be? What if I thought the lecture was boring...do I actually write that?" Student H wrote, "I think I know what I am supposed to be doing.... writing about how the lecture and the readings help me understand how to resolve the ethical problem in the case study. I think I can do this." After the first assignments were graded and returned to the students, apprehension decreased considerably. Student I wrote, "I am now able to understand how the discussions in our class help me see the discrimination other cultures experience and how an ethical problem needs to be looked at with cultural consideration." Student I also provided a more in-depth analysis. "Now I know what I need to be doing.... taking what I read before class, apply that to the lecture, then apply all that information to understanding why the ethical dilemma is a dilemma and using the *Code* to help me resolve the issue. Then I am supposed to reflect back on the entire experience of this week. It actually brings everything I have learned together in my mind. I enjoy it now--it's like a pre-study guide."

The instructor also encouraged students at mid-term time to sit down and review all their assignments, making sure that they were learning what they felt they should be learning, reflecting on the experience of education itself, and determining if they were more comfortable with ethical challenges and methods used to resolve them. This reflection on their assignments was also to be graded. Student F recorded, in a mid-term reflection on her assignments, "Now I know that I do have knowledge and I can go to the *Code* to help me solve ethical problems. I think I started out not really knowing what to do, but now I feel like I'm an expert. I have learned how to take information that I have learned in this class (as well as my other social work courses) and bring it all together in my mind and see how it applies to social work!" At the end of the semester, the same student wrote, "Now I have all this information that makes more sense to me in my mind and I feel more prepared to go into field. Before these assignments, all the classes would get mixed up in my mind. Now, I think I understand how it all fits together."

Overall Feedback from Students

Completing this type of weekly assignment was a new experience for the majority of students in this course. Many explained at the end of the course that the overall experience was painful but productive. Typical student responses that were written on end-of-the year evaluations were: "I dreaded this type of weekly assignment because it really did entail me preparing for class

and paying attention” (Student J). Student K wrote, “I think this is a good thing to do in the class because it really made me read and then think about how to apply everything I was learning. It did take a lot of time, though, a lot more than 45 minutes reading the book. It’s a lot of work but in the end, it really helped me learn.” Some students had mixed reviews of the assignment structure. For example, at the end of her learning journal, Student L wrote, “This assignment allowed me to vent about the frustration of some of the lectures--especially when a construct was hard for me to grasp. It was also nice in that you then addressed student concerns in the next lecture. Most instructors don’t care. They would have just continued on with the schedule.” The majority of students documented that the assignments required a lot of work, but that their learning experience was enhanced as a result of having to keep track every week. Others reported that being dismissed from class 30-45 minutes early was really nice, so they put extra effort into completing the assignment.

The last day of class, students were asked to write an anonymous review of the course (outside of completing the end-of-the year evaluation) and to focus specifically on the learning outcomes that had been specified in the syllabus. Students documented again that the learning outcomes, according to them, had been met. Student M wrote, “When I first read through the learning outcomes, I thought I would never be able to complete those in one semester. But with the reflective writing, I was able to target which outcomes I was not working on and then focus some of my studying on those areas which would help me learn or master that outcome.” Student M also wrote, “This type of reflective writing has helped me learn not only about my class but also how to organize my thoughts a lot better.” On the end-of-the year course evaluations, most students reflected back on the assignment and gave very good feedback.

Year-End Course Evaluation Student Comments.

1. “The reflective writing was interesting.”
2. “The once a week writing assignments were sometimes boring but helped me learn.”
3. “The writing assignment really helped me apply all the information in the course and helped me do better on exams.”
4. “Writing every week on a case vignette really helped me understand the *NASW Code of Ethics*.”
5. “The cases on ethical problems were interesting and scary---especially when I found out these were real cases.”
6. “The writing assignment comments from you were really good and helped me pass the course. I wouldn’t want to do them all over again, but I learned.”
7. “The writing assignments took up too much time--I have 4 other classes to do work in.”

8. "I will use reflective writing in my other courses to help me bring all the information together."
9. "Ethics I now understand---but only because every week I had to write about them."
10. "I never knew about the NASW *Code* but now I know it front to back."
11. "If I never see that green *Code of Ethics* book again, I'll be happy."
12. "Now I understand about how to solve a problem from a professional standpoint, not from a value/judgment standpoint."
13. "I never knew social workers had all these ethical problems to deal with--the reflective writing assignment really helped me see how social workers solve these problems."
14. "The writing assignment--it was helpful but I'm glad it's over!"

Case Vignette and Student Application Example

The following case vignette was assigned the seventh week of class, after discussing confidentiality, rights of partners, and the Tarasoff case.

You staff a support group for HIV-positive adults. During one of the group meetings, Gary Damian relates that he continues to engage in unprotected sexual relations with his wife. When challenged by a group member, he admitted that he was not being fair to his wife but that he was afraid she would leave him if she found out he was HIV-positive (Lowenberg, Dolgoff, & Harrington, 2000, p. 228).

Student I wrote in response to this vignette:

After getting through the emotion of anger on behalf of the wife, I tried to look at the situation from the perspective of the social worker, the male group member, and the wife. In the lecture we learned that as social workers we must "start where the client is" and also about the Tarasoff case. Obviously, this client needs help in working through his HIV-related issues. He is worried that if he tells his wife he has HIV, she will leave him, and he will have to be alone while struggling with HIV. He has already practiced in his mind telling his wife. But in order to be an ethical social worker, I have to figure out what is more important-- telling the wife about the danger of having unprotected sex with her husband who has HIV or respecting the wishes of the client and allowing the dangerous acts of unprotected sex to continue. Personally, I would say, "Of course tell the wife," but professionally I have an obligation to my client. The NASW Code of Ethics, (2000, p. 10), Ethical Standard, 1.07.c requires that the social worker break client confidentiality in cases of "serious, foreseeable, and imminent harm" is unpreventable to an identified person (p.10). The *Code* also points out in Social Workers Ethical Responsibilities to Clients, Ethical Standard 1.01, that we also have an obligation not only to our clients but to the larger society, and this obligation may supersede the loyalty owed to clients and that we should explain this obligation to our clients (NASW, 2000, p. 7). When I first read the vignette, I got mad and thought that the wife needed to know--this reaction came from emotions. The *Code of Ethics* then showed me that the dilemma is really not an emotional one, but one of education, obligation to see the bigger picture, and ultimately to help the client see and understand the larger picture. I think I would be able to explain to this client that 1) I understand his hesitation to tell his wife, 2) the importance of confidentiality, 3) instances when confidentiality may be broken, and 4) the assistance I could provide in helping him talk with his wife about his HIV status.

In this self-reflective journal exercise, the student obviously struggled with personal feelings and emotions versus professional obligations, a common occurrence within this course. Evidenced in this excerpt, the student was able to successfully integrate lecture material, personal reflection, the NASW *Code of Ethics*, and was able to provide sound resolution decisions based on this information. Many students often experience an emotional first reaction and then transition into a more professional reaction once they begin researching the case in the NASW *Code of Ethics*. It is obvious that this student wavers back and forth between emotion and professional, but ultimately defers to the *Code*, the information learned from the readings and the lecture, to help her further understand the most ethical way to critically analyze the ethical dilemma.

Limitations and Strengths

There are several limitations to integrating this approach. The first limitation is the deficiency in writing skills possessed by students, which leads to frustration in the journaling assignment. Instructors considering using these methods in their classrooms may experience frustration with the lack of writing skills possessed by their students. This can be a vicious cycle that detracts from the original learning objectives. One method used to circumvent this frustration is the explanation that journal entries are not graded on technical presentation but solely on critical thought and application. A second limitation is that the experience is labor intensive on the front-end, with in-depth explanations and instructions often being repeated throughout the class. Learning a new way to “learn” or a different teaching approach other than “I lecture-you listen,” may increase student insecurity, which results in requests for validation and assuredness throughout each stage of the assignment. A third limitation in integrating this approach in the classroom was the lack of empirically driven data to support the claims that SRJ is beneficial and that students became more skilled in the integration of classroom materials and readings to case vignettes. Our conclusions are based solely on excerpts from the SRJ and anonymous feedback that was provided. These excerpts indicate that the students' *perceptions* are that they became more skilled in the SRJ process, but no other data are used to support this claim, as this was the instructor's first endeavor in using SRJ. Further research in this area showing a correlation between test scores and SRJ would be most useful.

Strengths, however, outweigh the limitations. Students actively participate in these processes and report that they have a more thorough understanding of ethical application at the

conclusion of the assignment than they have from any other assignment. End-of- semester student evaluations are also consistently positive, with students reporting that these exercises helped them appreciate the struggles that social workers often encounter on a daily basis.

Conclusion

According to Reamer (2001), most social work students receive a basic introduction to ethical issues. Improving the classroom environment by providing a more competent and comprehensive approach to ethical decision making is pivotal to social work education, with both CSWE and NASW charging academia to integrate ethics throughout the curriculum. Educators have many models of ethical decision making from which to choose (Congress, 1998; Joseph, 1985; Lowenberg & Dolgoff, 1996; Mattison, 2000; Reamer, 1993). Building on this professional mandate as well as existing models, the authors integrated SRJ in an attempt to stimulate student learning.

The use of SRJ in Social Work with At-Risk Populations was beneficial, and the instructor will continue to use this approach in future courses. The case vignettes may be modified, as ethical dilemmas continue to change and evolve over time. The instructor hopes to use more WEBCT and interactive on-line activities to stimulate student competency with computer applications, and plans to form writing groups, so students can help each other with critical thought and applications through reflective writing, hopefully also increasing the cohesiveness of the students. The instructor also tried to have social work guest speakers visit the class to discuss ethical problems within their agencies, but, as this class meets during normal working hours (at 4:00 p.m.), has been unsuccessful with this venture. Providing students with exposure to an actual practitioner early on in the course could help them become more involved in the reflective writing process. Also, by providing a real-world practitioner to the class, students would receive firsthand knowledge of current ethical challenges within the profession. A guest speaker would also provide a different point of reference for the students and an opportunity to discover different approaches practitioners take in resolving ethical problems. This teaching methodology worked well for this instructor, and the course evaluations are positive. The most rewarding aspect of this approach is that students document that they actually learn throughout the course, enjoy the experience, and, for some, will continue to use this approach in other courses.

The information collected from this one-semester course in the form of this case study does show support for the integration of self-reflective writing in the ethics curriculum. The excerpts indicate that 1) students actively engaged in the learning process, 2) students became more skilled in the integration of classroom materials and readings to case vignettes, and 3) students were able to effectively synthesize the information through reflective writing. Students reported that, overall, the reflective writing assignments were enjoyable. It is important to note, however, that a few students did not find the assignment enjoyable. These students were also passive throughout the course, refusing to take notes during lecture presentation, showing up late for class, and handing in assignments past the due date.

This approach encouraged students to actively engage in the learning process and take responsibility for their classroom experience. From an instructor perspective, this approach to the teaching of ethics and moral philosophy provides valuable feedback on student learning methods, study habits, integration of material, critical thought, and application. According to students, this assignment also improved writing skills. The challenge for the instructor, however, is the time it takes to read and provide feedback on these assignments. For an instructor considering integrating this type of assignment, the time evaluating and responding to the weekly assignments must be considered.

The intent of this article is not to criticize anyone teaching method used in social work to enhance student interest in a topic area, but to provide an example of innovative approaches that have proven successful with undergraduate students in a rural two-year program. It is hoped that this article will motivate academicians to identify creative teaching techniques that will enhance the learning experience for social work students.

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