

Engaging MSW students in policy advocacy practice: A sample assignment inspired by the Grand Challenges Initiative

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Abstract

Current workforce data reveals minimal social work engagement in policy practice. Similarly, a recent examination of social work education shows a continued emphasis toward micro/clinical practice despite ongoing mandates from professional social work organizations to promote social and economic justice. Existing literature suggests that assignments which raise students' awareness of intersectionality and structural inequalities and include experiential learning activities can inspire social action. This article describes a creative graduate social work assignment designed to generate student enthusiasm for policy advocacy practice. The assignment, which requires students to interact with policy experts and develop a digital infographic and position statement informed by this interaction, is anchored by the Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative.

Keywords: Grand Challenges for Social Work, policy advocacy, social work education, infographics, social and economic justice

Introduction

According to a recent social work workforce profile only 2.8% of social workers were employed by civic, social, advocacy, or grant making organizations as reported on the 2015 U.S. Census (Salsberg, et al., 2017, Table 15, p. 21). Similarly, a survey of 2017 social work graduates revealed that policy and advocacy work are the primary focus for a mere .1% of all master's level survey participants (Salsberg, Quigley, Acquaviva, Wyche, & Sliwa, 2018, Table 53j, p. 48). Despite the social justice and advocacy mandates included in the Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017b), the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015) and the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2012), the practice emphasis in social work educational programs remains within direct/clinical practice for both bachelors and masters graduates surveyed (Salsberg, et al., 2018).

To encourage students to develop values, knowledge, and skills to achieve the mission of social work—to promote well-being for all—formal social work education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels must offer a curriculum that promotes an understanding of structural inequality,

intersectionality, and the role of oppressive and discriminatory policies and practices in the perpetuation of injustice. It is critical that this enhanced understanding be reinforced by classroom and field practicum experiences that allow students to engage in policy analysis and social change and advocacy efforts. The statistics referenced above suggest social work education has considerable room for improvement. The purpose of this article is to advance the conversation about dynamic policy education and to share an example of an experiential graduate level policy assignment created to stimulate students' interest in social action and further their understanding of barriers to advocacy and methods for dismantling these barriers through policy practice.

Conceptual Foundation

To provide some context, I present a rationale for reinvigorating macro practice education and examine some current pedagogical approaches. In addition, I suggest several components relevant to policy education: intersectionality, digital advocacy tools, and the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative.

The Rationale for Macro Practice Education

It has been previously established that curricula which support macro practice, specifically social welfare policy content, have developed significantly over time yet there continues to be a shortage of programs that offer macro practice-oriented specializations and field placements (Richter, 2016). The recent National Social Work Workforce Study of 2017 graduates indicated that only 18% of participants who graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work degree (BSW) and 13.2% of participants who graduated with a Master of Social Work degree (MSW) described the practice focus of their education as community organizing, advocacy, or indirect practice (Salsberg, Quigley, Acquaviva, Wyche, & Sliwa, 2018, Table 37, p. 35). Policy advocacy was included in the definition of indirect practice and identified as their primary employment role by just 8.3% of BSWs and 3.7% of MSWs surveyed. (Salsberg, Quigley, Acquaviva, Wyche, & Sliwa, 2018, Table 3, p. 18).

In my experience, students often remark they are not interested in and do not need to study policy because they plan to practice in clinical social work settings. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. Michael Reisch, a prolific scholar and social work educator, argued convincingly for the need for macro practice knowledge and skills at all levels of practice:

All social work practice occurs in a community context, and virtually all social workers work in organizations that are affected by social policies. Understanding the dynamics of communities and organizations and the policy development process, therefore, is an essential component of effective practice with every population and problem with which the profession is involved. (2016, p. 261)

Similarly, NASW ethical principles "social workers challenge social injustice" and "dignity and worth of the person," (which includes respect for diversity) as well as "Ethical Standard 6: Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society," provide direction to all members of the profession regarding specific change efforts, including shaping policies and taking social and political action, that will positively impact opportunities for equality and justice (NASW, 2017b). The Global Definition of Social Work includes the importance of human rights, social change and social justice, and

respect for diversity (IFSW, 2014). The Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training, adopted in 2004 by the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers, also identify advocacy and social action against injustice on behalf of marginalized populations and the importance of human rights as central to the core purpose of social work. These standards recommend curricular content which includes social welfare policy and social change processes as well as methods of practice that challenge inequalities and injustices (IFSW, 2012). Finally, the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) mandate macro policy content, "...social work is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons, locally and globally" (CSWE, 2015, p. 5). In fact, all 2015 CSWE competency descriptions include at least one of the following terms: policy, oppression, justice, human rights, or diversity.

In terms of actual social work practice, a brief examination of current data on poverty and discrimination suggest that there is much work to do. Although it appears that the official poverty rate has decreased slightly, and household income increased for the first time since the 2008 recession, the latest report still showed 43.1 million people living in poverty in the United States (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar, 2016). Marginalized populations of color, such as African Americans, continued to experience poverty at a much higher rate than Whites. Women and children also had higher rates of poverty (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar, 2016). A 2013 publication from the Movement Advancement Project (MAP) reported that the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender population (LGBT) experienced higher rates of poverty and job discrimination than heterosexual counterparts. The NASW report "Advancing the American Agenda" (2017a), issued to provide guidance to the Trump Administration, also detailed the negative impact of institutional racism, and reviewed how social workers can help create change by calling attention to hate crimes and racial profiling. Other suggested initiatives included immigration reform, reduction of child poverty, and equitable pay for women.

Clearly there is evidence to support that poverty, discrimination, and oppression continue to exist. In addition, there is agreement among the major professional social work organizations about the need for graduates to have policy advocacy knowledge and skills to achieve the mission of social work regardless of practice setting. However, it appears that some students may not share this perspective. As a result, social work educators are challenged to develop innovative strategies to facilitate engagement in policy practice.

Current Policy Pedagogy

A 2015 CSWE survey reported that only 4.2% of programs offered a policy practice specialization and just 1% of master's level students were enrolled in policy field placements (CSWE, 2016, Tables 35 & 36, p. 27). It appears that not much has changed since Ritter (2007) completed her study of licensed social workers and their involvement in political participation over a decade ago. Study results indicated that 48% of respondents thought they were not adequately prepared to engage in political activities (Ritter, 2007). More recently, Pritzker and Lane (2014) identified barriers to integration of policy practice within field practicums. The barriers included a lack of student interest and student fears about missing out on developing clinical experience. The authors also reported structural challenges such as geographical distances from macro placements and concern for adequate supervision in those

placements. Pritzker and Lane (2014) recommended infusing policy content throughout the social work curriculum as one way to generate student interest. CSWE recently partnered with several foundations to offer funding to schools of social work to encourage and support innovation in the integration of policy practice in field education. The summary report of the methods used by Policy Practice in Field Education Initiative grantees is now available as a resource (CSWE, 2018).

Other research details specific course assignments that raise students' awareness about structural inequalities, intersectionality, the dynamics and maintenance of oppression, and the impact these assignments have on all system levels as a method for changing attitudes and inspiring social action (Castillo & Becerra, 2012; Hancock, Kledaras, & Waites, 2012; Lane, et al., 2006; Snyder, May, & Peeler, 2008; Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006). Experiential learning events such as Legislative Advocacy Days are particularly effective (Lane, et al., 2006). Sundet and Kelly (2002) brought real world issues to life by requiring students to explore all sides of current legislative priorities through development of policy briefs which were ultimately used by legislative committees. Ritter (2013) approached her policy course from a practice perspective and taught students how to practice policy advocacy at the state legislature through a series of assignments which included written policy analysis briefs, fact sheets, and legislative testimony. Students then practiced delivery of oral testimony in mock committee sessions.

An informal review of a popular social work policy electronic mailing list confirmed that social work educators frequently use assignments that require students to write letters, emails, or opinion editorials advocating for specific policies. On this list, Klemm (2017, January 23) shared her unique plan to set aside time in her courses for students to contact their legislators by phone to share policy opinions and concerns. Her rationale for using this approach during class time included teaching students how to correctly identify who to contact and encouraging a routine practice. Finally, Bernklau Halvor (2016) studied how undergraduate students responded to policy education efforts and shared recommendations for how to improve students' policy practice skills. The assignment presented in this article is consistent with several of her suggestions including an emphasis on praxis, current events, and a variety of advocacy methods within a structure that allows for student self-direction.

Intersectionality

To teach effective policy practice, social work educators must be intentional in their efforts to help students develop awareness and understanding of how discrimination, oppression, power, and privilege are compounded by the intersection of multiple individual social identities. However, the full potential of this approach will not be realized without analysis of the systems of power that maintain such marginalization (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). In addition, Crenshaw (1991) argued that a focus on identity politics alone disregards significant within-group differences. Content on intersectionality sometimes appears in diversity and cultural competence courses, although little has been written about the application of this framework in social work education according to Robinson, Cross-Denny, Lee, Rozas, and Yamada (2016). Bubar, Cespedes, and Bundy-Fazioli (2016) suggested teaching students about intersectionality should occur across the curriculum. The results of their examination of graduate students' papers demonstrated a lack of student awareness about the impact of intersectional identities and power differences within the professional-client relationship. The assignment proposed here requires students to consider the impact of social justice barriers of policies and practices created by existing systems of power.

The Importance of Digital Literacy Skills

Current guidance provided by professional social work organizations emphasizes the importance of digital literacy for practicing social workers. In 2017, NASW published “Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice,” a document developed in collaboration with CSWE, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), and the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA) (NASW, 2017c). The standards address providing information to the public, design and delivery of services (including advocacy), information management, and education and supervision. Also, the NASW Code of Ethics was revised to explicitly include technology practices in communication and the provision of social work services (NASW, 2017b). Lastly, technology is an official element of the EPAS, “Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior” which includes the component behavior “Use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes” (CSWE, 2015, p.7).

The use of social media for advocacy work has exploded in recent years. Gismondi and Osteen (2017) reviewed the role and power of technology in three actual case studies of student activism on campus. Current policy textbooks include web-based resources for policy research and present examples of how social media can be effectively used in advocacy practice (Jansson, 2018; Lewis, 2018). The University at Buffalo School of Social Work (2018) has created a helpful interactive infographic which provides detailed guidance about the use of social media by social workers.

I have observed that although many social work students are already using social media, most have not received specific training about how to do so ethically, nor are they familiar with how to create and use digital tools for advocacy purposes. Thus, one of the learning objectives for the assignment presented in this article is for students to design an infographic, one type of digital tool that can be used in policy advocacy.

The Grand Challenges Initiative

The purpose of the AASWSW Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative is to generate research, collaboration, and social action around twelve equally important social problems. In creating this social agenda, the AASWSW desires to promote:

- Individual and family well-being,
- A stronger social fabric, and
- A just society that fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers pathways for social and economic progress. (2018, para. 4)

The Grand Challenges framework provides a helpful structure for students to develop an understanding of policy advocacy. The AASWSW website provides current research, policy briefs, and policy action statements for each of the identified challenges. These documents offer a starting point for further exploration and application of social work policy practice skills. Any of the Grand Challenges could be used for this proposed assignment. However, to keep the background reading and overall project manageable within the other course requirements, I identified the Grand Challenge “Achieve Equal Opportunity and Justice” as sufficiently broad for use in my policy course. Per the policy brief issued by AASWSW, “addressing racial and social injustices, deconstructing stereotypes, dismantling inequality, exposing unfair practices, and accepting the superdiversity of the population will advance this challenge” (AASWSW, 2016, para 1). The scope of this challenge allows students a wide range of policy topics to

choose from. The remainder of this article summarizes a sample experiential policy advocacy assignment that incorporates digital tools and is anchored by this Grand Challenge.

Sample Policy Advocacy Assignment

Course Description

Social Welfare Policy is a required core course in an online MSW program of a public university. The physical campus and most of the full-time faculty are in the southwestern United States. The course is designed to help students develop policy practice skills and conduct legislative advocacy at local, state, and national levels, and within organizations and communities. Course objectives include applied assessment of the impact of policies on social justice and human rights efforts with disenfranchised populations.

The Assignment: Social Issue Interview, Infographic and Position Statement

Overview. Students are asked to choose a social justice topic of personal or professional interest, conduct research about relevant policy efforts, identify current barriers to advocacy in four domains (social, environmental, political, and economic), and recommend policy actions. The assignment is divided into two parts: The Social Issue Interview and Infographic and the Position Statement. Related reading assignments include material about the Grand Challenge “Achieve Equal Opportunity and Justice” and the textbook for the course, *Becoming an Effective Policy Advocate* (8th edition) by Bruce Jansson, which provides a skills-oriented framework for policy practice and policy advocacy. Jansson defines policy practice as:

efforts to change policies in legislative, agency and community settings by establishing new policies, improving existing ones, or defeating the policy initiatives of other people” and policy advocacy as “policy practice that aims to help relatively powerless groups...improve their resources and opportunities. (2018, p. 2)

CSWE competencies and assignment learning objectives. The first two learning objectives for the assignment address components of “CSWE Competency 3: Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice” and “CSWE Competency 5: Engage in policy practice” (CSWE, 2015, p. 8). The objectives are (a) students will demonstrate an understanding of barriers to advocacy and the advancement of social justice within social, environmental, political, and economic contexts; and (b) students will identify options to advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice. Through their work on the assignment, students must identify and assess the impact of social policies on service access and delivery as well as think critically about policies that will advance justice. In the process they will expose unfair practices that prevent equal opportunity and justice and look for solutions. Successful achievement of the first two objectives will require students to “apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels” (CSWE, 2015, p. 8).

The third learning objective applies to digital literacy: Students will design a policy advocacy infographic. As previously discussed, this learning objective is timely and relevant as social media and other digital tools are frequently employed in current policy practice and advocacy efforts. To demonstrate achievement of this objective, students will design a one-page digital infographic

highlighting their selected social issue, related policy, barriers to social justice, and recommended policy actions. Infographics are primarily visual representations of information and data.

Part one: Social issue interview and infographic. For the first part of the assignment, students are asked to review the Grand Challenges information and select a social issue of interest to them which exemplifies a lack of equal opportunity or justice for a specific population. Next, they must identify a local politician/legislator or social work administrator in their community who has some knowledge about this issue and arrange for a face-to-face or phone interview. The purpose of the interview is to discuss the interviewee's position on the issue; learn about existing social, environmental, political, and economic barriers to justice and advocacy; and explore possible ways these barriers could be addressed through policy actions. To prepare for the interview, students are instructed to research background information about their topic including current legislation/policy, programming, funding, and barriers to advocacy. Students are provided with some sample interview questions such as: What about the social context related to this issue makes advocacy and social justice difficult to achieve? What policy actions could a social worker support or engage in to work toward equal opportunity and justice for individuals affected by this problem?

To complete Part One, students are instructed to design a one-page infographic to summarize the information gained in their research and the interview. Since developing an infographic is an unfamiliar skill for most students, suggested resources for free infographic software, internet tutorials, and sample infographics are provided. In addition, students are given detailed guidance about the required elements which include (a) the issue, (b) relevant background, (c) at least one current barrier to advocacy and social justice in each context and identified as such (social, environmental, political, and economic), (d) at least two specific policy actions to overcome barriers and achieve social justice, (e) the name, title and credentials of the individual interviewed, and (f) references.

Part two: Position statement. In the second part of the assignment, students are instructed to use the information collected during the Social Issue interview to prepare a succinct yet well-developed position statement of advocacy for social justice around their selected topic. Suggested length is one to two pages and content guidelines include a summary of the overall issue, a brief statement of their advocacy position, and a list of bullet points outlining at least three specific policy advocacy recommendations to support this position. Students are encouraged to review relevant NASW policy information and to evaluate their recommended policy and service actions for consistency with professional social work values and ethics.

Implications for Policy Social Work Education

Despite long-standing advocacy on the part of many macro-oriented social work practitioners and educators as well as the clear mandates of professional social work organizations, recent data confirm the continued emphasis toward micro and clinical education and practice. The proposed unique assignment is one way to actively engage students and generate excitement about macro practice. Graduate social work students are encouraged to select topics that are personally relevant and to be creative when designing an infographic and position statement. The assignment requires critical policy analysis and interaction with actual policymakers to identify social justice and policy advocacy barriers and actions yet provides a welcome change from writing a lengthy research paper.

Qualitative student feedback about the assignment has been positive; many students admitted they enjoyed learning how to use new digital tools and appreciated the opportunity to be creative. Students reported feeling energized about their topics and have articulated a new awareness of policy advocacy skills that can be used in all levels of social work practice. At the same time, some students have expressed frustration about the amount of time required to learn the infographic software and the challenges of arranging an interview.

This assignment can be used alone or as an addition to the standard “write your Senator” assignment. In fact, some students have even reported proudly sharing their infographics with legislators and agency administrators. As discussed here, The Grand Challenges Initiative provides a structured framework to anchor policy advocacy education and serves as a reminder of the ongoing work required to achieve well-being for all. The proposed MSW policy assignment is one educational tool which can aid in this vital effort.

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