Enhancing Student Social Work Practice Skills and Critical Thinking Through Podcast Production

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There is increased demand for social work educators to utilize diverse pedagogical strategies to meet the needs of students of varying learning preferences and ensure student mastery of social work competencies. While many social work educators have found traditional instruction to be effective, I have found that using innovative, nuanced approaches and tools to be equally, if not more effective in bridging theory to practice and enhancing practice skills among students. Podcasting is one such tool. Moving away from the traditional paper-based assignments to a broad and deep multimedium, I outline in this article the use of podcast technology in a redesigned social work course assignment. By having students produce podcasts to integrate and convey the life experiences of "clients", as opposed to the traditional model of case summary/psycho-social reporting, the results of a non-experimental survey completed at the end of a 15-week course revealed enhanced listening and social work interview skills, critical and connective thinking, and a richer understanding of conceptual frameworks and theoretical models presented in the course through the use of podcast production. Feedback obtained from a survey from 19 students enrolled in the course revealed positive outcomes of the use of this new technology in the classroom.

Finding creative ways to engage students in the learning process can be a challenge, but it can also be exciting. As social work education continues to expand to meet the growing need of an ever-evolving student body, varying learning preferences, and ensuring student mastery of social work competencies, the use of new pedagogical strategies, such as the use of technology and multimedia in the classroom become all the more valuable, if not necessary (Minor, 2014; Roehl et al, 2013). Further still is the profound challenge for social work educators to help students strengthen the link between theory and practice, as well as master the practice skills necessary for service delivery. Thus, nuanced and innovative pedagogical strategies, such as the use of multimedia and experiential activities in the classroom, like the flipped classroom (Holmes et al, 2015), student-produced public service announcements (Chu & Quinn, 2018), or the creation of audio podcast recordings, which has the capacity to supplement and expand traditional models of learning (Hudock & Warden, 2001; Loya & Klemm, 2016; Lenette et al, 2015; Walsh et al, 2010; Grant & Bolin, 2016), allow educators the opportunity to be creative in the way in which they deliver theoretical and practical knowledge to their students.

The Use of Multimedia and Podcasts in Higher Education

Many forms of multimedia used in higher education, including podcasts, have shown to enhance and deepen student learning (Fernandez et al, 2009; Merhi, 2015; Cho et al, 2017; Thomas & Marks, 2014; Levinson et al, 2016; LaFrance & Blizzard, 2013). Although a relatively new mode of instruction, podcasts, an audio file that can be distributed, but "is more than simply the audio file itself" (Kidd, 2012), are being used more frequently in classrooms due to their pedagogical usefulness. For example, Vajoczkt, Watt, Marquis, and Holshausen (2010) discovered that podcasts "benefited their [student] understanding and retention of knowledge of course material" (p. 352). Likewise, Jarvis and Dickie (2010) identified that all students benefited from the podcast reference library made available and was a valuable learning resource, of particular appeal to students with a visual approach to learning. Additionally, Fernandez, Simo, and Sallan (2009) conducted a study that consisted of the creation and broadcast of 13 podcasts over four months in which 90 distance students took part. The outcomes revealed that the podcast production process is a powerful tool as a complement to traditional course resources. Given the increased demand in higher education to incorporate nuanced and innovative multimedia instruction into the classroom, podcasts are becoming a more popular means by which this demand can be met (Blum, 2018).

As with social work, podcasts are a medium of connection, specifically delivered through narrative and storytelling. What makes podcasts unique is the way in which they are distributed: conveniently and accessibly. Beyond the classroom, these expediently accessed digital audio files are increasingly becoming an effective instrument for disseminating and gaining new knowledge for general audiences. Not unlike traditionally written case studies used to reveal the complexities of lived experiences, audio case studies (distributed as podcasts) have the ability to expose the same complexity when used in social work classrooms. This platform challenges students to engage with the content and close listen/read in context in a way that is both

accessible and palatable. It is a pedagogic strategy that has the capacity to bridge that which seems inaccessible and complex, to something that can be observed, studied, and even understood. This is particularly important in social work, as students are required to draw closer to their client's lived experiences, particularly in their field education.

Similar to the use of video-recorded simulation (Asakura et al., 2018), Digital Storytelling (LaFrance & Blizzard, 2013), video documentaries (Levinson et al., 2016), or TED talks (Loya & Klemm, 2016) in higher education, oral podcast narratives can develop listening skills in social work students as well as have the potential to cultivate creativity (Kidd, 2011). While instructors and students may find some challenges in the use of any relatively new technology (Allwardt, 2011), the benefits have been shown to favor student learning. For example, in a systematic examination of technology-based instruction in social work education, Wretman and Marcy (2016) found that 84.2% of the studies reported that technology-based pedagogical methods produced academic outcomes equivalent or superior to traditional methods. Furthermore, the use of podcasts in other service-oriented professions, such as medical education, has also increased, with some studies showing improvement over traditional modalities and others showing similar efficacy (Cho, Cosimini & Espinoza, 2017).

While there is limited literature on the pedagogical value of student-produced podcasts in the social work classroom, other student-produced multimedia projects have emerged as a means of engaged learning. For example, Chu and Quinn (2018) explore the usefulness of student-created public service announcements (PSAs) to help BSW students learn cause-based advocacy. The results revealed that the project supports competencies in cause-based advocacy, professional social work identity development, and critical thinking, among others. Additionally, Levison et al. (2016) reveal that activities associated with producing a video documentary as part of a community assessment assignment have shown to be an effective pedagogical strategy to enhance student learning. Thus, the engaged and interactive qualities inherent in audio producing/podcasting, as well as the more useful practice-oriented aspects, are invaluable tools in the social work classroom.

Overview and Objectives of Course

Behavior in the Environment (or the equivalent course) is a foundation-year course required for all students enrolled in graduate social work education. The primary goal of the course is to demonstrate how behavior results from the constant interaction of current and past cultural experiences, social systems, social policies, and biology. As a result, class lectures by the instructor focus on social-cultural and neurobiological or neuropsychological foundations of behavior. While the textbook utilized in the course provides a global review of human development, class lectures emphasize how to analyze behavior within a developmental-ecological context. Concepts of brain development and physical health, along with social learning, information processing, and ecological-cultural theories provide a framework throughout the course for understanding human behaviors. Thus, this specific course lends itself to student exploration and research on various systems and theoretical frameworks, as well as the application of course material to a particular case study or narrative. Furthermore, as a means of bridging developmental and theoretical frameworks to practice, the digital case study (referred to as the "Podcast Project") produced in audio form, was assigned to aid students in moving beyond abstract/theoretical concepts to application of course knowledge, strengthening the link between theory and practice. In addition, the Podcast Project assisted students in meeting the course objectives most relevant to the project, particularly the requirement to conceptualize theoretical models, research, and social work practice methods used for understanding human development and behavior across the life span, as well as define and identify components of ecological systems and social systems and how these effect human behavior and how human behavior effects ecological and social systems.

Project Design, Requirement, & Technical Aspects of Production

The Podcast Project was designed to help students become more aware of the major factors in the range of environments that influence behavior and how people can be promoted or deterred from maintaining or achieving health and well-being. In lieu of a traditional written/paper case study, the Podcast Project provided students with the tangible and experiential opportunity to practice social work skills like active (embodied) listening and empathy, as well as the the analytic skills (putting themselves into the "client's" worldview and interpreting the "client's" experiences) in order to successfully create the podcasts. Thus, the podcasts themselves proved to be a far richer mode for transmitting the "client's" life experiences, as well as the students' understanding of the systems of influence than traditional paper form.

The project was expected to be approximately 15-20 minutes in length and address and demonstrate students' emerging competency in applying knowledge of human behavior and the social environment. The project required extensive research, had to be presented in podcast/audio form at the end of the semester, and

ultimately used as a teaching tool for other students.[1] The project, worth 40% of course grade, was assessed on clarity of expression, comprehensiveness, and listenability (see Appendix A for grading rubric). Students were also required to use at least four to six scholarly sources in the project, in addition to the course text, which was to be cited throughout the episode. Although students were required to focus their studies on one "client", they were also required to present the information (listed below) with a careful eye toward not generalizing the information they gathered.

The aim of the project included the utilization of conceptual frameworks applicable to the importance of understanding person and environments. As such, students were required to complete the following project requirements:

1) Interview a close friend or family member ("client") and conduct (audio recorded) one-hour interview around an important life-related theme the interviewee was comfortable sharing.[2]
2) Transcribe the interview.
3) Once transcription is complete, *close read* the text and identify themes, patterns, and other essential and fundamental clinical ideas that emerged during the interview.
4) Conduct literature review via peer-reviewed articles to further elucidate and situate your understanding and comprehension of the interviewee's experiences in theory.
5) Begin writing your script, critically thinking, merging, and integrating the data (interviewee's audio) with your own voice.
6) In your script:

   a. Identify the specific developmental period of the life cycle such as infancy, middle childhood, adolescence, young adult, older adult, etc. of the person interviewed. Explain the typical development and behavior during these cycles as presented in class, prior learning in other social work courses, in assigned readings, and student selected reference material readings. How can this knowledge be useful in terms of understanding person in environment?

   b. Identify the major range of systems in which your "client" functions. Briefly explain and present an audio sociogram/culturegram/ecomap of these interactions in terms of systems theory. How can this knowledge be useful as a framework to guide the process of assessment, intervention, and evaluation, in terms of understanding person and environment?

   c. Based on the interviewee's narrative, present and discuss how social/cultural, inclusive of racial/ethnicity, spirituality, social class, family status and history, age; demographics of community, including, but not limited to population factors and availability and efficacy of opportunities; affections/sexuality, gender, and other biological factors can be used as frameworks for understanding the interviewee's narrative. How can this knowledge be useful in terms of critiquing, understanding, and applying person and environment? Further, how does the literature explain and help you understand your interviewee's life experiences?

   d. The social environment can promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being. Social work organizations/agencies/policies, as well as social workers themselves, are part of a client's environment. What are the social work implications regarding the themes that emerged during your interview?

Each week, students were given instruction on how to produce a podcast. As one might reasonably expect, the students' technical knowledge varied considerably. While many were familiar with the production technology, others required additional tutoring and instruction. The timeline presented at the beginning of the course allowed students to complete one task at a time, which prevented confusion, potential overwhelm, and any problematic issues related to time management. Further, the schedule allowed students to delve deeper into each phase of the project's production, particularly in conducting the interview (which required close listening), reviewing the interview (which required close reading), research (which required further study), and the analysis of the audio "data" (or, original source material) they had gathered (which required critical and connective thinking).

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[1] Audio recordings become "podcasts" when assigned to RSS feeds that can be accessed and subscribed publicly. In this case, the students' final audio recordings were only made accessible to other students in order to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

[2] All interviewees signed confidentiality agreements and were made aware that the audio would be used for educational purposes only and not made accessible to the general public.

All students were required to bring a laptop to class each week and eventually download the free software necessary for audio editing (Audacity and LAME MP3 Encoder). In addition, students utilized an audio recorder via smartphones, headphones, transcription services, and royalty-free music websites. While the mechanics of podcast production proved to be difficult and confusing for some students, by the end of the course, all students were proficient in the technical aspects of the production process and were successful in completing the project.

Student Perceptions

At the end of the 15-week course, students were anonymously surveyed and asked to answer seven open-ended questions designed to capture the efficacy (or lack thereof) of podcast production in several areas of student learning: theoretical knowledge, critical and connective thinking, social work interview skills, and the greater conceptualization of frameworks discussed in the course.

This survey was distributed to students who were enrolled and completed the first year, graduate social work Behavior in Environments course in which the Podcast Project was piloted.[3] Of the 27 students enrolled in the course, 19 students voluntarily responded.

Students were asked seven questions and invited to write about their experience and perceptions of the assigned project. Each question highlighted a different skill (e.g., critical thinking, enhanced listening, and a richer understanding of conceptual frameworks and theoretical models) that were narratively quantified to either confirm or reject the project's pedagogical efficacy. For example, given social work's fundamental person-in-environment framework for working directly with clients and the systems of which they are a part, student responses confirmed this expanded understanding and application of the framework via the interview. One student declared, "the podcast helped me understand that the family provides the blueprint and the environment further shapes one's development and individualization". The recognition of the way in which the environment shapes human behavior was echoed by another student who noted, "I see them [homeless] from a different perspective", resulting in an increase in awareness in how s/he "as a social worker can assist them and be an advocate and be a voice for them through policy and make changes or improve this social issue".

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[3] Surveyed students were made aware that the feedback they provided was anonymous and would be used for educational purposes only. Thus, no IRB was required as the survey results/data was used for instruction and teaching purposes.

Through the interview, students were able to "hear" emotions, which proved to be an enhanced experience to "reading" emotions, as one student pointed out, which "helped me tie together what we learned in class". This type of connective thinking, or, bridging theory to practice, is essential in social work education. After all, it is a practice profession that values the intersubjective experience between practitioners and clients, further highlighting the need for students to learn the skill of embodied listening.

An extension of this attuned and embodied listening is the skill of interviewing, which is a means by which social worker can support their clients in exploring the deeper meaning and patterns of their presenting issues. One goal of this project was to offer students an opportunity to practice this. As a result, as one student pointed out,

> This podcast is similar to a session with clients. It made me realize questions and answers and how to dig deep and realize people's issues and feelings! It helped me to not just hear what the person was saying, but to really listen to what they had to say. Listen deeply to their pain and cry for help or assistance that's needed. To actually be there and give support.

Consequently, practicing this type of embodied listening, students reported increased critical and connective thinking. For example, one student reported, "the project was helpful in making me aware of how words that a client might be saying may have further meanings". Another reported that, "as the person was speaking, I immediately started seeing theories from class pop up. It's more engaging when hearing real life examples", which marks the significant way in which the project helped build a bridge between theory and practice.

Project Successes and Challenges

While most of the student responses were positive and affirmed that the original project goals were successfully met, critiques were offered as well:

> It helped by the interview component. I feel that we could have gotten as much out of writing an article or report.

The area that received the most critique was the technical aspect of podcast production. On several occasions, students reinforced the time-consuming and laborious nature of the project. As one student pointed out:

> This was a different project and I'm glad I got to say I did a podcast for the first time. Although it was very time consuming and gave me anxiety. I think this should be something that everyone should do!

Another student agreed and reinforced the challenge:

> The technical stuff - sound editing - was definitely a challenge - I enjoyed the interview and I learned a lot from the research I did, but putting together the podcast was not enjoyable - but I'm proud of myself for completing it.

Finally, one student, although relatively positive, said,

> Honestly, in the beginning and throughout the podcast project I didn't like it. I didn't understand the point in the project. But after finishing my project, I understand now. To be able to listen to someone's story was so beautiful and I'm glad we were able to do this. There's always a hidden story and I'm happy I was able to uncover it. The project wasn't hard, it was just time consuming, but it was worth it.

Again, while much of the student feedback was positive and encouraging, there are aspects of the process that were challenging. For example, given that none of the students in the course had any technical familiarity with audio editing, some students required additional guidance with the technology. In future efforts, it is reasonable to expect that not all students will grasp technological concepts quickly or effortlessly. Some students may need frequent instructions or one-on-one training. Some students, as became apparent during the course of the semester, may require guidance in the area of research and incorporating literature into the script, as well as further explanation on the overall and broader goal of the project.

Conclusion

Finding creative and meaningful ways to engage students in the learning process can be an exciting endeavor. Of particular interest to social work educators is the need to teach both theoretical and practical skills. Thus, it is encouraging to find and utilize pedagogical tools that are not only equivalent to traditional modes of instruction, but can also prove to be more engaging and effective. The use of podcast production, embedded in clear goals for student learning (both theoretical and practical), has shown to be a method of teaching that can enhance student practice skills and critical and connective thinking, and offer a richer understanding of conceptual frameworks and theoretical models presented in the course. This is evidenced by the student survey results and final grades students received on the project through the use of grading rubric (see Appendix A) designed to assess four areas, including: content, application, complexity of ideas, as well as production and mechanics and delivery.

It is essential, however, that educators use a critical lens when adopting and executing new pedagogical tools. For example, I paused on several occasions throughout the semester to evaluate the goals and objectives of this project and to examine whether or not the course I had chosen was the one best matched to the project. Additionally, I questioned if implementing a new teaching modality was in fact much more valuable than the traditional written case study, particularly this form and with these students. While to a large degree I do trust the data provided by the students, there still remains the fact that there is not a comparison group. Therefore, it is difficult to fully determine whether it is the podcast-making process or the culmination of classroom experiences that contributed to the positive outcomes.

Lastly, I made countless decisions about my students' learning at every juncture. Students were asked to complete the project individually rather than as a group, they were tasked with interviewing someone they knew rather than a client they served in their field placement, preparing questions ahead of time rather than conduct the interview from scratch, conducting research and incorporating it into the final narrative rather than write a formal paper, and learning the technical aspects of podcast making rather than merely recording the interview and writing a script without student narration. Ultimately, I am convinced of the tremendous value of this engaging, nuanced, and innovative tool to enhance social work practice skills. Thus, as social work educators continue to train and equip students to be critical, reflective thinkers who are connected with clients, the current method of teaching must also be influenced by technology and innovation (Ahmedani, Harold, Fitton, & Shifflet, 2011, p. 842).

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