Innovative Teaching in Social Work Education: A Collaborative Learning Technique

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Abstract

Most Master of Social Work (MSW) students have dissimilar backgrounds, often coming from rural areas and diverse walks of life. These students encounter problems when there is no foundational social work course tailored to prepare them for complex graduate social work content. To enhance their general improvement, we instituted collaborative learning that enabled students to work together in pairs or small groups, beginning in mid-semester. We compared their midterm grades with final grades using paired-sample correlations and found significant increases in their final grades compared with their midterm grades. The collaborative learning significantly increased students' understanding of new concepts and their grades.

The importance of effective and innovative education in the United States today cannot be overemphasized. In spite of this importance, policymakers and scholars have mostly focused on improvement in the areas of math and science in order for the country to score well (Fensterwald, 2013) compared with other industrialized countries. Although attention has been paid to bringing about the desired outcome in math and science, little is said about the social sciences, and most importantly, the role that effective and innovative teaching as well as effective and innovative learning plays in reducing the gap in the falling standards of U.S. education. Effective and innovative delivery of instructional materials also tends to be overlooked or minimally employed, especially in the social sciences, because educational policymakers have traditionally tried to resolve such issues as "the lack of teachers, socioeconomic status, inequality, inadequate facilities…" (Oakes, 2002, p. 9). Policymakers' focus on competing in the international arena in the areas of math and science and their desire to equalize disparities within public schools are not unimportant, but those in decision-making positions can be blamed for not giving identical attention to effective and innovative learning, social and environmental factors, differential learning styles, and within-classroom factors that negatively affect student learning outcomes. Consequently, it is reasonable to suggest a shift to address how these factors can be ameliorated using collaborative learning, which, according to Gokhale (1995), enables students to be responsible for one another's learning as well as their own.

Several factors have been identified as influencing student learning, especially for newcomers in MSW programs. For example, Pryce, Ainbinder, Werner- Lin, Brown, and Smithgall (2011) note that in dealing with nontraditional students, professors should be cognizant of the "challenges of bringing classroom learning with lessons of the field" (p. 465). In the case of many students in the social work foundation program, although most of them are returning students to the university, they come from different disciplines with little or no knowledge about social theories, paradigms, or concepts. Some of these students are "academically unprepared" (Gabriel, 2008, p. 1) especially with the demands of professors, family commitment, full-time jobs, and the daily commute to and from class. Furthermore, completing, in most cases, 900 field practicum hours is another hassle that almost all of them go through. MSW foundation students also come from different academic backgrounds, and building educational capital in social work could pose significant difficulties for some of them.

With the burgeoning areas of practice and numerous materials to cover in just a rigorous 2 years, we began reviewing ways to make incoming students' learning experience less burdensome. We thus modeled a program after the collaborative learning technique, which enables students to work "together in pairs or small groups to achieve shared learning goals," p. 4, (Barkley, Cross, & Major 2005). We contend that this approach reduces students' academic tension and makes them more comfortable in blending field work, course work, and their various extra-curricular challenges with ease. In lieu of learning-centered "environments that pay careful attention to the knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs that learning brings to the educational settings" (Bransford, Brown, & Cooking, 2000, p. 133), we therefore predict that introducing collaborative learning to MSW foundation students significantly increases their students' understanding of new concepts and thus as well as enhances their academic performances.

Literature Review
Changing Majors to Social Work

The lack of an undergraduate social work major characterizes almost all foundation students. Students usually plan for a lifetime career in a single field (Benton, 2003); however, for reasons associated with a volatile economy and lack of jobs, they tend to gravitate toward professions that can guarantee employment. Most students, especially in the humanities, thus change careers at least once every decade and decide to earn an academic degree that will ensure job flexibility. Kelly (1976), for instance, concurs that the potential to have a job makes certain professions attractive to people from other academic backgrounds to seek admission in graduate programs like social work, medicine, law, and engineering. Compared with other disciplines in the social sciences/humanities, social work graduates are more likely to be employed. Driven by these job flexibilities, students enroll in majors and then realize that learning a new subject is a challenge, particularly for those who come from different academic backgrounds. These students have difficulty relating to basic social work concepts (practice models, theories, client systems), and have little or no knowledge of the historical premises of social work as a course and as a profession. Foundation students usually do not have the knowledge that is specific to the social work curriculum (Leppel, 1984) especially in the area of practice, social justice, and ethics. At times, their focus is on specializing in clinical social work without knowing what it takes to become a clinical social worker. Most of what is introduced in class is new if not strange to them, making their academic work quite cumbersome.

Additionally, most learning in graduate programs, according to Benton (2003, p. 1), "is unsupervised, independent, and onerous." Such academic freedom may cause some students to overwhelm themselves with poor choices and therefore drop out of graduate programs. For instance, between the 2012 and 2013 academic years we noted that one out of every nine foundation students dropped out of the program while not a single advanced-standing student dropped out. Dropout occurrences notwithstanding, since the main reason for an influx of students into the MSW foundation program have been attributed to possible job assurances, it remains a fact that most of these students have little or no knowledge about social work theories, paradigms, or concepts and some are "academically unprepared" (Gabriel, 2008, p. 1) and thus find it more challenging to complete the program without extra helping techniques.

Commuter Student Culture

There are many reasons why students chose to stay at home and commute to and from school. According to Chin (2013) and Marlow (2011), most students choose to commute because of the convenience or the luxury of living at home, the need to save money, guaranteed housing, and the trouble of dealing with peers in the dorms who may not have similar interests.

Most Midwestern universities cater to the needs of students who live in the several rural townships surrounding the university and commute to and from school. In these schools, 63% of students are commuters, although the university has boarding accommodations that can take larger numbers of its students. In spite of the choice to stay at home or near the campus, commuting to and from school also has some difficulties. Kuh, Gonyea, and Palmer (2009, p. 1) posit that commuting students have "too many competing demands on their time because of work or family commitments." Most foundation students in the MSW program at these Midwestern universities have jobs, children, field placements, and housework. Part of the culture of commuter students is usually not engaging as much with in-class group work, not participating in before- and after-school learning activities, and the tendency to return home immediately after classes. Students who live on campus are more engaged overall compared with students who commute since living farther away from campus reduces the likelihood of taking advantage of educational resources such as the libraries, instructor office hours, a writing center, and workshops that these institutions provide. In fact, such students show little or no interest in using campus-based learning resources (Jacoby, 2000; Kuh, 2001) especially foundation students who commute to and from school. Additionally, extreme weather conditions sometimes force commuter students to head home as soon as they leave the classroom even when they desire to stay in school and study.

Returning Nontraditional Students

Teachman and Paasch (1989) suggest that family background, socioeconomic, and life-course factors cause White as well as Black women to return to school even after marriage. Most students who are returning to school after many years report distress or unhappiness over both leaving home and returning to school (Lewis, Volk, & Duncan, 1989). Increasing graduate demands from professors, family commitments, completing lengthy class assignments, and the field practicum hours also wear down returning nontraditional students. Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010, p. 181) propose that "although rates of college attendance have increased substantially among unmarried parents, their college completion rates are low." The main reasons behind the difficulties faced by parent students is inadequate academic preparation and financial problems, which compel unmarried students to interrupt their studies to earn more hours at work and therefore compromise the quality of their education experience (2010) as well as time of graduation. The authors also point out that although there are many public programs that give assistance to student parents to attend college, these students hardly ever get the assistance because of poor coordination (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). With so much daily academic and personal chores, for these nontraditional students studying is very tedious and challenging. It should be noted that in spite of these challenges, Leppel (1984) and Mitchell, Wister, and Gee (2004) observed superior performance of older returning students compared with the performance of students continuing to college directly from high school.

Working Students

Literature is replete with studies that confirm most graduate students work full- and part-time jobs and go to school at the same time. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), there has been a 15-hour increase for working students between 1970 and 2005. "New research shows that students are working more and juggling a multitude of roles, creating anxiety and lowering graduation rates" (Perna, 2010, p. 1). Since working has proved to be a central responsibility for many graduate students, Perna (2010) proposes understanding how employment affects students' educational experiences. Accordingly, since many students must work to pay the costs of attending college, put food on the table, and take care of their families, by being considerate and working around their schedules professors can ease students' frustrations. Regardless of the reason for working and the effort to make things easy for them, trying to meet the multiple and sometimes conflicting demands of these working students often creates high levels of stress and anxiety, making it less likely that students will complete their degrees on time (Perna, 2010).

Recruitment Process

The recruitment process of graduate students differs from institution to institution. Mark, Lusk, and Daniel (2004) and Aiman-Smith, Bauer, and Cable (2001) suggest that students' demand for graduate programs depends on the amount of money that will add to their current income, geographic location of the program, and the fringe benefits that come with being promoted (office space, computer, and bonuses). Additionally, the probability of being admitted into graduate programs should be based on applicants' academic attributes such as test scores, grade point averages, work experience, and letters of recommendation (Rolph, Williams, & Lee 1979). In most cases, however, recruiters put emphasis on filling the classroom more than admitting students who have the potential to succeed in the program (Rigley, 2011).

Yakubovich and Lup (2006) confirm that the priority of many institutions is to have as many students as possible irrespective of their potential to earn employment or to even graduate. Tomlinson's (2008) decomposition of categories of recruitment, namely, objective and subjective selection, found that the likelihood of a subjective recruitment increases when employability is ensured. This may explain the pull of social work foundation students entering the MSW program. On another note, Goldbart, Marshall, and Evans (2005) posit that recruitment of students from different countries makes coping in the programs difficult since these students are sometimes unfamiliar with academic concepts and struggle with the English language. While it is understandable that institutions have to make money, a proper way of recruitment should be based on student need (Aiman-Smith et al., 2001) merit (Rolph et al., 1979) and collaboration in graduate training, research, and ways to help students acquire subsequent employment (Thune, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

The concept of collaborative learning, according to Gokhale (1995, p.1), is the "grouping and pairing of students for the purpose of achieving an academic goal." In other words, the term "collaborative learning" refers to:

> An instruction method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal. The students are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own. Thus, the success of one student helps other students to be successful. Proponents of collaborative learning claim that the active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking. (Gokhale, 1995, p.3)

This model has been widely used and thoroughly researched and advocated throughout the academia but has only recently found habitation in the profession of social work. Other aspects of the same concept have also been advanced. For instance, Newswander and Borrego (2009) contend that when interdisciplinary programs facilitate engagement by supporting diversity, participation, connections, and interactive teaching and learning, students report positive experiences. Whereas Oakes (2002) focuses more on the tangible structures of the school system that hinder effective learning, these researchers noted that graduate social work students at a Midwestern university have a difficult time going through the MSW program for several of the reasons outlined in the reviewed literature. For instance, some of the students in the MSW program who had undergraduate degrees in disciplines other than social work were unable to grapple with social work content and thus were less likely to learn effectively. Based on the challenges identified in the literature, we hypothesize that the introduction of collaborative learning to students in an MSW foundation at the Midwestern university under study will increase their academic performance.

Method

After attending a collaborative learning workshop, the authors decided to introduce the model in four required MSW graduate foundation courses (SW613: Advanced Generalist Practice with Marginalized Populations, SW614: Human Behavior and the Social Environment, SW611: Generalist Social Work Practice, and SW621: Social Welfare Policy). We applied and secured an IRB from the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at St. Cloud State University and were cleared to go ahead with the research. The sample and demographics of the courses were as follows: Each class of the four courses was made up of 9 students, making a total of 36 students. The combined sample was composed of 32 females (88.8%), and 4 males (11.2%). All the students were White and had an average age of 23.2 years. The reason of introducing collaborative learning in these courses was to allow students to do exercises and assignments in groups and/or pairs according to Gokhale (1995), in order for them to achieve higher academic goals.

Students were expected to cultivate and work on given tasks collectively, develop awareness of themselves and others in their groups, and to be accountable to each other in spite of their differences and/or similarities. Students were required to complete projects and related assignments as part of the course requirements. Assignments were designed to promote thoughtful and critical reflection. The researchers ensured that these standards were maintained in all classes. It should be noted that the introduction of the collaborative learning technique was done after the midterm exams, when most student scores were not satisfactory. To ascertain whether collaborative learning helped the students, the midterm grades of each of the courses were compared with the final grades using the t statistic known as the paired sample t test. We hypothesized that collaborative learning increases student grades.

Measures and Results

Table 1 represents the paired sample correlations between the midterm and final scores of the courses.

Table 1

Paired -Sample Correlations

Variable Pairs	Correlation	Significance
SW613F – SW613M	.57	.112
SW614F – SW614M	.96	.000
SW611F – SW611M	.54	.130
SW621F – SW621M	.71	.034

Note. The significance level is .05; SW613 = Marginalized Populations; SW614 = Human Behavior and the Social Environment; SW611 = Generalist Social Work Practice; SW621 = Social Welfare Policy.

The table presents the correlation between each of the pairs of the variables given. In this study the standards to determine the strength of the correlations ranged from strong, moderate, to weak, and have been distributed as follows: correlations greater than 0.8 were generally described as strong, correlations that were less than 0.8 but were greater than 0.5 were considered moderate, whereas correlations that were less than 0.5 were generally described as weak. Based on this standard, it can be said that there was a moderate correlation between SW613F and SW613M when controlling for collaborative learning: $r(8) = .57$, $p > .05$. Again, moderate correlations were also determined for the following variable pairs: SW611F and SW611M ($r(8) = .54$, $p > .05$) and SW621F and SW621M ($r(8) = .71$, $p > .05$) after controlling for collaborative learning. As concerns the SW614F and SW614M it seems reasonable to find a strong correlation between this pair after controlling for collaborative learning: $r(8) = .96$, $p < .05$. Seen differently, it can be said that while SW614F and SW614M and SW621F and SW621M were statistically significant, SW621F and SW621M were moderately correlated while SW614F and SW614M were strongly correlated. On the other hand, SW613F and SW613M, and SW611F and SW611M were both moderately correlated and were not statistically significant. Once some level of significance had been determined between the pairs, it was necessary to test the hypothesis. In doing so, the paired sample *t* test was used. Table 2 depicts the paired-sample test of the midterm and final scores of the courses under study.

Table 2
Paired-Samples Test

Variable Pairs	*M*		*SD*	*t* statistic	*df*	Significance
	Midterm	Final				
SW613F – SW613M	1.77	5.84	2.68	4.23	8	.003
SW614F – SW614M	2.58	4.31	1.13	9.14	8	.000
SW611F – SW611M	3.02	5.42	1.56	8.10	8	.000
SW621F – SW621M	3.00	8.10	3.32	5.02	8	
						.001

Note. The confidence interval of the difference is 95% while the significance level is .05; SW613 = Marginalized Populations; SW614 = Human Behavior and the Social Environment; SW611 = Generalist Social Work Practice; SW621 = Social Welfare Policy.

After discerning the correlation between the variable pairs, we decided to use the paired-sample *t* test to examine if indeed we could positively confirm that collaborative learning enhances student academic outcomes. As explained below, early in the semester before we had introduced the collaborative learning technique, we realized the students were struggling. After the midterm when the model was used, the authors saw changes in the way students learned and also increases in the students' final grades. The paired-sampled tests of each of the courses helped us accept or refuse the null hypothesis. In doing so we report the following: means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) for each group, t value (*t*), degrees of freedom (in parentheses next to *t*), and significance level (*p*), as shown on Table 2 below.

Data Analysis

Data in this section were analyzed based on the correlations, the paired-sample statistics, and the hypothesis that "collaborative learning increases student grades" as presented below. In order to strengthen the test process of the hypothesis, we combined the correlation results with the paired-sample statistics before making a determination. In this case only variables with statistically significant outcomes for both the Paired-Sample Correlations and the Paired-Samples Test were considered as hypothetically strong. Variables with only one statistically significant outcome for either the Paired-Sample Correlations or the Paired-Samples Test were considered as hypothetically weak. Variables with no statistically significant outcome for either the Paired-Sample Correlations or the Paired-Samples Test were considered not to be a null hypothesis and therefore rejected.

Given the findings of this study, we determined that 57% of the collaborative learning technique accounted for increases in students' final exams in SW613: Advanced Generalist Practice with Marginalized Populations class. Based on the results presented on the table, it can be said that students in the Marginalized Population class scored significantly higher grades in the final exams ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.59$) than in their midterm exams ($M = 1.72$, $SD = 3.24$), $t (8) = 4.23$, $p < .05$; we therefore reject the null hypothesis.

In the case of the SW614: Human Behavior and the Social Environment class, we found that 96% of the collaborative learning technique accounted for increases in students' final exams. The paired-sample statistic for this variable indicated that students in the Human Behavior and the Social Environment class also scored significantly higher grades in the final exams ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 2.01$) than in their midterm exams ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 2.91$), $t (8) = 9.14$, $p < .05$. Given the explanation and the results for this class, we confirmed that collaborative learning increases student grades.

We also determined that 54% of the collaborative learning technique accounted for increases in students' final exams in SW611: Generalist Social Work Practice. By the same token, students in the Generalist Social Work Practice class scored significantly higher grades in the final exams ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.78$) than in their midterm exams ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.41$), $t (8) = 8.10$, $p < .05$. Based on the explanation and the results for this class, we confirmed that collaborative learning increases student grades.

Lastly, 71% of the collaborative learning technique accounted for increases in students' final exams in the SW621: Social Welfare Policy class as well. Additionally, students in the Social Welfare Policy class also scored significantly higher grades in the final exams ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.39$) than in their midterm exams ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 4.15$), $t (8) = 5.02$, $p < .05$. The results for this class also confirmed that collaborative learning increases student grades.

Discussion and Conclusion

Between the 2012 and the 2013 academic years, we found that 67% of the students enrolled in the MSW foundation program at the Midwestern university under study had been out of school up to 5 years or more. Ramsay, Jones, and Barker (2007) found that first-year university students who work have a hard time adjusting and finding support. Although that study was based in Australia, this was also the case with working and studying in the Midwestern University under study. Several times students in the MSW program have sent emails to the professor saying that s/he was not able to make it to class because of a work schedule. This study attempted to determine whether collaborative learning increases students' grades, and for the most part, our findings were in the affirmative, because whereas most of the second half's increases in students' grades in the cohort were because of the collaborative learning technique (CLT), we are careful to rule out other extenuating factors such as hard work during the finals, sheer brilliance of some students, ability to work alone by other students, and continuous student efforts to understand new social work concepts over time, which may have accounted for the proportion of increases not explained by CLT. Since only a certain proportion of grade increases are unexplained by CLT, it will be very interesting in the foreseeable future to actually find out what explains the other portion of increases in the grades.

Although our study leaves room for future research to determine the actual variables that account for increases in students' grades, we maintain that the results although only partially confirmatory should not be disregarded; rather, our assertion that CLT increases students' grades should be tested with other samples to completely rule out any other limitations of the CL model. Because of the sample size and the partial confirmation of the hypothesis, we suggest that at this stage the study can be generalized without further replication with another sample.

In spite of the limitations of the study, bringing collaborative learning into the area of social work is a plus and will go a long way to enhance student learning and reduce the challenges that foundation students face in MSW programs. Also, some of the problems raised in the literature such as commuting to school, understanding concepts, and recruitment processes can be revisited to make university easier and accommodative to new graduate students.

Other relevant and similar CLT aspects that were not measured in this study are peer partnerships, classroom observations, and critical friends, which involve coaching and shadowing. Based on the CLT evaluative feedback, however, most of the students who participated in the program said they the program was the main reason they had increased scores at the finals over the midterm, the program enabled them to increase their awareness about issues of diversity among students, and they were able to easily master new and complex social work concepts. Additionally, whereas their levels of collaboration remained the same during the period under study, the majority of students maintained that they preferred group work. Lastly, we found that traditional students were more comfortable with hybrid CLTs, but nontraditional students said they benefitted more when they stayed together in a physical location to do their work.

As for the implications for social work and as we mentioned earlier, this study is important to social work in that it has mostly been used in other fields but not in our field. If used properly, we think that the model will greatly enhance students' mastery of the ethical and core values of social work, help in understanding human difference, and also help in making field practicums a lot less cumbersome. Students working in groups will be able to help each other, as suggested by proponents of collaborative learning that the "active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking" (Gokhale, 1995, p.1), and by the same token the ability for participants to learn from each other.

The future research directions for this study are twofold: first, research to determine the actual variables other than CLT that account for increases in students' grades, and second, research to learn if the model can work to increase teaching effectiveness among instructors.

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