

Integrating Teaching And Practice: Effective Teaching-learning In Social Work Education

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Abstract

This study examines effective teaching and learning methods in social work education. A sample of two hundred and fifty students of the University of Benin was randomly selected and a 25 item questionnaire validated by experts' judgement was administered. The findings reveal that students benefit most when participatory teaching and learning method is used, followed by the integrative seminar approach, group discussion and lastly the lecture method. Recommendations are made to social work educators to adopt participatory teaching and learning and the integrative seminar method as these enhance students' learning outcomes and their application in practice...

I. Introduction

Teaching and practice are two sides of a coin; teaching is what a teacher does to facilitate learning; whereas practice in an educational setting is what a learner does or performs using what is learnt. There are consistently high correlations between students' ratings of teacher and their perception of "amount learned" and applied in practice. Theall & Franklin, (2001). Practice is not separate from teaching of social work theories as it is very much woven into the curriculum of social work education and integral to its effectiveness. Bogo and Vayda (1998) argued that preparing students for practice involves a process whereby the information, knowledge and analytical base acquired by students in academic aspect of social work education is translated into an ability to relate to individuals in need of assistance and to arrive at professional decisions while rendering services.

Successful teaching involves good teaching and learning methods which motivate both the teacher and the student and facilitate acquiring knowledge and skills which can be applied in practice. An effective student-teacher interaction includes various visual and auditory support and effective use of instructional methods. A good teaching method and effective student teacher interaction help to increase retention of what is learned and make learning enjoyable for the students (Sovyanhadi & Cort 2004; Soliven, 2003).

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A teacher has options when choosing a method by which to teach. When deciding what teaching method to use, a teacher needs to consider students' background knowledge, environment, and learning goals. Teachers need to be aware that students learn in different ways, and that students have different ways of absorbing information and of demonstrating their knowledge. Effective teachers use techniques which cater to multiple learning styles to help students retain information and strengthen understanding. Various methods are used to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn (Wikipedia, 2009). Theall and Franklin (2001) find that students are the most qualified sources to report on the extent to which the learning experience was productive, informative, satisfying, or worthwhile. Diverse methods used in effective teaching and learning include: lecture method, group discussion, participatory teaching and learning, and integrative seminar.

The lecture method is used for introduction of ideas, explain relationships between theory and practice and recapitulate main points in a relatively short time. Amayo (2006) indicates that lecture as a method of communicating theories, ideas and facts is very popular among teachers of higher education institutions. It enables the teacher to deliver his/her prepared body of information with little or no interruption as the students may take down notes in the process and few questions may be asked by students to clarify any confusion. It is adaptable to different settings, either small or large groups of students, both in the classroom and in the field.

McCarthy (1992) notes that in the lecture method, the audience is passive, learning is difficult to gauge and communication is one way. It is not particularly effective when teaching and learning, as in social work education, is required to be flexible and it is expected to direct students towards learning outcomes resulting in effective practice.

The group discussion method gives students opportunity to participate in discussion and linking concepts to practice. After some preparation with clearly defined roles of learners and identification of relevant and interesting topics, discussion may well take up most of the lesson time, with the teacher only giving short feedback at the end or even in the following lesson (Wikipedia, 2009). Team learning or group discussion does not only produce favorable student performance outcomes, but also encourages greater participation and help develop self confidence and leadership ability (Perkins & Saris, 2001; Yoder & Hochevar, 2005). Group discussion allows students to talk with each other and listen to all points of view in the discussion (Wikipedia, *ibid.*) (2009). It helps students to overcome thinking in a personally biased way. Following a lesson plan, the teacher can assess the lesson's outcome by looking at the student's ability to work in a team, leadership skills, and presentation abilities.

Participatory teaching and learning acknowledges that the teacher is not a repository of knowledge who only fills the students' empty vessel. It is recognised that students bring beliefs, values, skills and knowledge to the classroom which have a vital impact on their

practice and also their ability to learn practice (Doel & Shardlow, 2005). Learning through participation enables active involvement of learners in posing and answering questions. The participatory method is effective in building students' self-confidence and, self-efficacy. It strengthens students speaking and communication skills (Wikipedia ,2009). According to Joseph (2003) the participatory method is very effective when it is done seriously and systematically. Students not only learn their given topic, but they gain experience that could be very valuable for applying knowledge in practice and life. Active participation in the learning process has crucial influence on learning and practice both on the part of the educator and The integrative seminar approach serves as a guided introduction to social work practice. The faculty member exposes students to the practical application of social work values and ethics in social problems, policy analysis, and students' activities, questions and concerns related to their field work. Through integrative seminars, students connect their practice activities to theoretical knowledge and reflect on critical practice issues such as their own values and ethics, diversity, social practice and self-awareness (Bogo & Vayda, 1998). Joseph (2003) argues that it is through this process of learning, the students are helped in developing a holistic understanding of social issues, causative factors, and possible strategies for intervention to improve and/or resolve problems affecting the well-being of people. The integrative seminar, therefore, helps in sharing knowledge, clarifying doubts, and improving plans, and provides scope for cooperation and collaboration among students working in the same community.

As students go on field placements and attend integrative seminars, they feel relaxed to talk about their field experiences, expectations, challenges, and hopes – thus making the practice assignment a rewarding learning experience. The integrative seminar is one of the mechanisms in which social work education strives to integrate knowledge acquired in the classroom with that acquired from field education experience. It is a vehicle that helps to integrate and promote learning of practice and theory in social work education (Birkenmaier, Wilson, Berg-Weger, Banks, & Hartung, 2003).

II. Statement of problem, research questions and methodology

The training of a social worker is a complex process that involves integration of theory and practice in teaching and learning methods. The training of the social worker needs to meet the high demand of practice to help provide solutions to myriad social problems in society. The goal of education is that teachers should guide their students to build their own base of knowledge and apply it to practice (National Policy on Education, 2004). Anastas (2010) also notes that the knowledge about how to teach effectively is growing. The range of traditional teaching and learning methods which social work educators have used need to be critically examined. It is necessary to ask which of the teaching and learning methods are more in use and which are more effective?

The research questions, therefore, are:

- 1.) What teaching and learning method do teachers use in social work education?
- 2.) What are more interesting and effective teaching and learning methods in social work education?

In trying to answer these question, the study attempts to:

- Find out the teaching and learning methods used by teachers to teach social work students.
- Explore the opinion of students about the teaching and learning method they perceived as the most interesting and effective.
- Provide suggestions for improving quality of teaching in the light of students' perception.

The findings of this study are expected to be of benefit to students, teachers, social work educators, school authorities and social practitioners. It is expected that social work educators thus will be able to make informed choices about effective methods in order to help enhance their students' educational attainment.

The research design adopted for this study is the descriptive survey research. Two hundred and fifty Bachelors of Social Work students at the University of Benin were selected using simple random sampling technique from a population of about one thousand to seek their opinion about the most effective teaching and learning methods as perceived by them. The instrument adopted is the questionnaire, subdivided into two sections A and B. Section A contains the demographic data, while section B contained twenty items with a Likert type four option choice scale, ranging from Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

The validity of the instrument was verified by experts' in the field of social work. Their observations were used to ensure content validity. The Cronbach alpha formula was used to determine the internal consistency reliability; the reliability coefficient of 0.78 was obtained. The data collected were analyzed using the appropriate descriptive statistics measures, mean, mean percentage, standard deviation and rank.

Findings of the study

Research Question One

What teaching and learning methods do teachers use in social work education?

Table 1: Frequency of use of teaching and learning methods

Method	Mean	Mean Percentage (%)	Standard Deviation	Rank
Group discussion	260	43.33	10.11	4th
Integrative seminar	340	56.67	9.87	3rd
Lecture	520	86.67	11.46	1st
Participatory teaching and learning	440	73.33	9.78	2nd

Table 1 shows a mean and mean percentage of respondents as 260 and 43.33% for group discussion, 340 and 56.67% for integrative seminar, 520 and 86.87% for lecture method and 440 and 73.33% for participatory teaching and learning methods. So of the four methods, the lecture method is the one most used, followed by the participatory teaching and learning method while the integrative seminar is rarely used. The group discussion method is almost never used.

Research Question Two

What is the most interesting teaching and learning method in social work education?

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of effectiveness of teaching and learning methods

Method	Mean	Mean Percentage (%)	Standard Deviation	Rank
Group discussion	13.61	85.06	1.95	3rd
Integrative seminar	14.74	92.12	1.67	2nd
Lecture	12.76	79.75	2.20	4th
Participatory teaching and learning	14.78	92.37	1.38	1st

Table 2 shows the mean and mean percentage of respondents as 13.61 and 85.06% for group discussion, 14.74 and 92.012% for integrative seminar, 12.76 and 79.75% for lecture method and 14.78 and 92.37% for participatory teaching and learning methods. These shows the students understand what is taught most in using the participatory teaching and learning, followed by the integrative seminar. While the other two methods even though used are not the ones preferred by the respondents.

III. Discussion of findings

The study investigated integrating teaching and practice and effective teaching and learning methods in social work education. The findings show that of the four methods, most used is the lecture method, followed by the participatory teaching and learning, the integrative seminar and the group discussion method. The last one is almost never used. These findings are in agreement with the work of Amayo (2006) which posits that lecture as a method of teaching is very popular among teachers of higher institution.

In support of the finding, Doel & Shardlow (2005) point that participatory teaching and learning acknowledges that the teacher is not the sole provider of knowledge in the classroom; what happens there is affected by beliefs, values, skills and knowledge that students bring with them which determine the learning results. Razack (2002) indicates that social work students attend practicum seminars which cover a wide range of topics including innovative learning in community settings and helps break the boundaries between theory and social work practice.

The study also showed that students understand what is taught most when the participatory teaching and learning and the integrative seminar approaches are used, which share certain common characteristics. Even though the other two methods, lecture and discussion, are used more frequently in classrooms, these are not methods of choice for the respondents. These findings are supported by works of researchers as noted above. The findings are in line with Birkenmaier et al (2003) findings that integrative seminar is an effective way of integrating knowledge acquired in the classroom with that acquired from field education experience.

It is worth noting the caution of Amayo (2006) who affirms that the discussion method requires appropriate skills of group handling in order to produce effective discussion and these skills take time to develop. The more informed and eager students may monopolise the discussion. Amayo asserted further that it is not a very effective method for describing procedures or breakdown of a component and it is time consuming.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal that the methods mostly used is the lecture method followed by participatory teaching and learning, integrative seminar and group discussion methods. The findings also reveal that the students understand what is taught most in using p

articipatory teaching and learning, closely followed by integrative seminar, then group discussion and lastly the lecture methods. Recommendations are made to all social work educators to emphasize participatory teaching and learning and the integrative seminar method, which have some common features, in their choice of the methodology. However, it cannot be categorically said that other methods should not be used in any circumstance. In certain situations, lectures and group discussions are also appropriate. It is necessary for the teacher to make a choice of the teaching-learning strategy depending on the content, time available, and students' background and interest—balancing and combining different approaches with the teacher, in collaboration with students, exercising the best judgment. Further studies can be carried out to determine the efficacy of teaching and learning methods in different contexts and to address problems regarding integration of teaching-learning with

application of knowledge in practice.

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