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Abstract

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An Assessment of the Impact of a Revised Client Case on Students' Ability to Successfully
Complete a Social Work Writing Course

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Abstract

Many agencies expect newly graduated BSW students to have professional writing skills. It is therefore vital that social work programs prepare students for this aspect of practice. This study expands on the current research by determining the adequacy of a revised client case used to complete agency documents in a new social work writing course. Students completed questionnaires regarding the effectiveness of the case. The client case was found to be adequate for completing the documents.

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Despite the great importance of record keeping in the social work profession, research on the subject is quite limited. The majority of the literature on writing in Social Work focuses on teaching students to write academically, the use of journals and reflective writing assignments, and writing for advocacy or for publication in social work journals. While most of the literature acknowledges the importance of document writing in the profession, there are a limited number of recent studies that stress teaching document writing to BSW students before they enter field placement. The date of publication of the articles used in this literature review reveals this fact, since most of the literature that exists on the topic was written more than ten years ago.

The purpose of this study is to expand on the current research regarding BSW courses which focus on writing for agency practice. Since this study takes place in a BSW writing course classroom, it provides a unique perspective on how students perceive writing documents based on a client case. Document writing from the students' viewpoint has been overlooked in past research. It is vital to pay attention to this aspect of teaching social work writing, however, because of the power that documents have in practice. In addition, student input was a major goal in this study, thus empowering students to realize their potential power in writing for social work.

Hernandez, Dole, and Chavkin (2004) state that social work writing consists of mostly narratives, which differ from academic writing. These narratives form the agency documents by compiling the clients' lives, goals, needs, strengths, and more. However,

social work narratives are not creative writing. A client's life is nonfiction and should be documented with professionalism (p. 54).

In the field of Social Work, writing serves as a means of advocacy, communication with clients and other professionals, documentation, and more. Without textual documentation and communication, social work would lose its essential organization; privilege of power as a profession; contact with clients, colleagues, governmental institutions, agencies, and resources; legal evidence to protect clients; consistency when clients are reassigned to other workers; advocacy abilities; and much more.

Client records and documentation are fundamental aspects of social work practice. According to Paré and Allen (1995):

Records are also part of a larger system of benefits and control. For example, they determine who gets welfare, whether a child is placed in foster care, if a refugee client gets refugee status, whether a person with a mental health problem is a voluntary or involuntary patient. Records are powerful documents that support and enhance treatment or deny services. (p. 167)

In addition, Taylor (2008) states that “no business, agency or organization, whether in the public or private sector, can function without documents” (p. 27).

Record keeping on client progress serves several purposes. Falk and Ross (2001) note that writing not only creates documentation, but also teaches social workers other vital practice skills. There are four purposes for documentation. First, understanding the perspective of others is a necessary concept for social workers to grasp and utilize throughout their practice. “To be effective, social workers must be exquisitely sensitive to the experiences and feelings of those they try to help – and able to describe those

experiences and feelings” (p. 131). When a worker does this efficiently, he or she also learns empathy.

The authors state that the second purpose of document writing is to describe communication, clients, agencies, and communities. Description personifies the client, builds observation abilities, identifies worker biases, and communicates professional information. It is imperative for workers to remember their privilege of power when writing descriptively:

Social workers, in constructing case narratives, have the power to objectify clients and reduce them to moral types, diagnoses, or data in support of theory. By so doing, social workers can limit their own professional vision and block their ability to form effective working partnerships with clients, doing damage to the very people they aim to help. (p. 133)

Falk and Ross assert that the third purpose is to analyze situations and client needs. This includes assessments and progress documentation, which in turn develop workers’ organizational abilities, the use of coherent development of ideas, and critical thinking skills. Assessment documents have specific criteria that they must meet in order to be unbiased, complete, and professional. Assessments require not only specific and perceptive client descriptions, but also must delve into analysis and logical conclusions.

The last purpose of document writing the authors point out is worker accountability. This includes proper writing of behavior plans, progress notes, treatment summaries, and other types of documents. Meanwhile, workers not only are held accountable for their work, but also cultivate “clarity, focus, consciousness of diverse perspectives and requirements of potential readers, and analytic reasoning skills” (p. 128). In order to stay as accountable as

possible, workers must remember who will be reading the documents, such as clients, supervisors, other agencies, courts, and other professionals. Taylor (2008) adds to this concept of accountability by highlighting the fact that outside parties view documentation as a resource on the clients:

For outside reviewers post hoc documentation is a primary source of knowledge and understanding about practice. It is entirely predictable, therefore, that inspection and inquiry reports tend to highlight 'bad' recordkeeping as an area of concern and recommend new procedures for ensuring 'good' practice in this area. (p. 29)

Existing literature reveals the lack of BSW education on document writing for the profession. According to Waller, Carroll, and Roemer (1996), BSW students in the past have been placed in practice settings without first learning to write documents. "These efforts seem to be based on the assumption that practice alone makes effective writers. The fallacy of this idea is evident, particularly in schools of social work, where students write much and often but generally do not write well" (p. 45). The authors claim that many students enter their field placements with no former experience of client or agency documentation, instructed to read documents that were written by other workers in the past, and then expected to write well-formulated and unbiased documents on their own. Taylor (2008) suggests that:

Many practitioners report that a significant amount of time is devoted to producing case material, which may include assessments, care plans, correspondence, and review forms...In respect of the everyday routines of practice, recording could be said to have low cultural value. For this reason it

is perhaps unsurprising that 'teaching' about case recording is rarely formalized. At the same time, case records perform an essential function in terms of organizational and public accountability and skills in case recording are deemed essential. (p. 28)

While practitioners may consider spending time on record-keeping unfeasible and a burden, it is clear that agencies use documentation as a vital process.

Bachelor of Social Work students learn to write in their English classes or academic social work-related papers, but are often not directly taught practical writing skills to be used in practice. Dias (2000) notes that teaching students to write includes more than bestowing knowledge; it gives students a skill that is undoubtedly used outside of the classroom. He also states that most students already understand how to use language through social interaction, so they simply require some direction on paper (p.12). Some educators recognize the lack of student writing abilities and make an effort to help students improve, but miss the main point. "They [educators] attempt to address the problem by teaching particular forms of writing such as journals or case summaries rather than by helping students develop an overall writing proficiency that would equip them to meet the demands of different professional situations" (Waller, Carroll & Roemer, 1996, p. 46). When students learn to write effective records of client meetings and advocacy, they are empowered to act professionally, have confidence in their ability to assist clients, and positively impact the written work they are attempting to accomplish. "In social work education, it is essential that students be empowered to find their own authority, an authority they will need to assert in order to advocate for their clients" (Waller, Carroll & Roemer, 1996, p. 46).

Rompf (1995) speculated several key reasons why social work educators typically do not teach students the elements of practice writing skills. First is the tendency of educators to blame poor student writing skills on the English department. Professors often encourage students to seek out help from writing centers and English instructors in the universities instead of tutoring the students themselves. Second, “other social work educators feel limited in what they can do, given the constraints of an already demanding curricula and the burden placed upon them by pressures to advise, conduct research, publish, and perform administrative tasks” (p. 126). Third, since the education for social work writing skills are often absent in universities, the instructors themselves have not had proper training on how to write for practice. Many educators feel insufficient when they consider teaching or editing students’ writing. Finally, due to personal and professional time constraints, educators often do not want to read and grade more writing assignments.

Despite all of the reasons to avoid teaching document writing in the social work classroom, students gain a significant advantage when this skill is incorporated into the curriculum. Rompf (1995) states that educators have a myriad of knowledge and experience to share with students, but writing is what truly allows the student to grasp course material. Since practice experience and expertise is generally abstract, providing students with an opportunity to write their own documents and reports allows them to form a more concrete concept of the instructors' knowledge.

Anderson (2003) offers one possible solution that universities may offer to BSW students. She created an online module to teach students how to write documents for social work agencies. The module can be offered as an option to students in universities where a document writing class is not a mandatory course. The module consists of five components:

- 1) Purpose and background of the module
- 2) Rationale regarding the importance of writing in the human services field
- 3) Writing samples from the field of social work and other human services (examples of family assessments)
- 4) A basic tutorial for students needing additional assistance in basic writing (and links to additional grammar Websites)
- 5) Assignments for practice (two assignments for students to develop a family assessment on a television family and another made-up family) (p. 81)

Anderson conducted a two year study on students who used this module. It was found to help students learn how to write better than if they had finished their BSW classes without the module. This idea shows the importance of offering BSW students a writing course to prepare them for the workplace.

Social work curriculum that includes writing, or implicitly revolves around document writing assignments, completes students' education and preparation for field placement. Simon and Soven (1989) suggest that all social work classes should include some aspect of writing in addition to specialized classes that enhance students' documentation skills. "Students can and should begin receiving preparation to write professionally from the time that they are introduced to the social work curriculum, and this initiation should be followed by continuous integration of specially designed writing assignments in intermediate and advanced courses" (p. 48).

Method

A BSW course, titled "Writing for Agency Practice," was created to teach students how to write documents based on a client case named "Maxine." The focus of this course is on teaching students to write directly for practice in an agency. Using genuine examples of documents from existing area agencies, students are assigned blank documents to fill out based on the client case Maxine. The goal is to develop professional writing skills,

confidence, and awareness of writing demands in the profession. The documents assigned are: intake forms, biopsychosocial assessment plans, plans of care/goals for a client, case and progress notes, collegial correspondence, advocacy letters, and case summary/termination forms.

Each week the students are taught how to complete specific documents using the Maxine client case. The students are given positive and negative examples of a different client case on how to write the documents. After students practice writing their own assignments, an in-class peer review session is conducted. Students, if they desire, are then able to make the suggested changes if they choose and turn in a final draft of their work. The professor plays the role of an agency supervisor when correcting the students' documents, making suggestions that would be beneficial for true agency practice. Students may then make any corrections suggested by the professor and add their final document to a case file on their client.

Dolejs and Grant (2000) note that writing is a social act, in which students must interact with each other (such as in working with a client or peer reviewing other students' papers) and learn through the sharing of ideas. They also state that students need to learn how to write for social work by using a process of three types: Prewriting, Writing, and Rewriting. This includes understanding gathering information (such as client data), writing it down (or documenting it), and then editing and revising (or proofreading before turning in any documents in an agency) (p. 24). Each of these document writing techniques were utilized in the writing course for this study.

The Maxine client case was initially written for a different course. The other course, a co-requisite to the writing course, focuses on role playing with clients to simulate a

practice setting. The writing course was created to parallel this practice course, since students could role-play with the "client" Maxine, and then fill out agency documents in the writing course based on the role-play session.

Since the client case Maxine was originally written for a different course, it lacked many details that were necessary for writing agency documents. As a BSW student in the pilot class for the writing course, I, along with my classmates, found many information gaps when writing class assignments based on this particular client case. I revised the case according to the students' opinions of what would complete the case for use in this course.

To further improve the effectiveness of the client case, students enrolled in the Writing for Agency Practice course in the following semester were asked to complete a questionnaire to test the adequacy of the new client case after completing each document for class. A sample of this questionnaire is included in the Appendix. Students were asked how effective the client case was for each written document, what was missing, and if any part of the case was unclear. Students then explained the reasons for their answers and gave specific examples when possible. Since the students in the BSW program co-enroll in both the course that the client case was initially written for and the writing course, they were able to review both versions of the case. This enabled the students to compare the cases and provide feedback on how to improve the case for document writing. Each week, the researcher visited the classroom to collect any completed questionnaires. The student responses were then analyzed, changes were made to the client case, and revisions were made to the document assignments for the course.

The student input in this study fulfilled one of its major goals of empowering students. Since students were considered knowledgeable in social work writing and given

the ability to voice their opinions, they were also allotted the power to gain confidence in their writing skills. The students were also part of the project as it progressed, so they observed the status of the client case from the beginning to the end. This is also a key part of the empowerment process, since the outcome of project was the main reason the students participated in the study.

Since the sample size was small, the demographics were not particularly diverse. Eleven students participated in the study. Ten of the students were female, while one was male. Students were not asked to identify their races or ages, so these demographics are unknown. However, some minority races and non-traditional aged students were represented in the classroom.

Findings

Overall, the students found the changes in the client case to be helpful when completing class assignments. A majority of the students felt that the case was written clearly, that it contained necessary information, and that it was adequate for document writing. One student stated, "I felt it [the case] gave adequate information for me to fill out the intake form and understand what she was going through and what she wants to happen, why she's here." Another student echoed satisfaction with the new case, stating, "I don't think it was unclear at all. It was pretty straightforward, easy to read and informative." In addition to the positive remarks, many important suggestions for changes were also made.

Since students filled out questionnaires for each individual document they completed, there were varying suggestions for changes to each assignment. The two documents which required the most changes were the intake and biopsychosocial forms, since these are the documents which examine the client's situation with the most detail.

Examples of suggested changes were to include more missing basic information, such as the client's insurance and educational information, exact income level, specific medications taken, and date of birth. Students also suggested more detail on current relationships to family members and friends. Other proposed changes included the desire for more details on why certain adjectives were used to describe Maxine, requests for more specific examples of her personality and behavior, and suggestions on how to enhance the clarity of the case in regards to the chronology of the client's story. Changes were made to the case to include more of this information. In addition, the professor of the course revised some of the assignments to align more clearly with the case.

When discussing the plan of care/goals document, many of the students requested clearer statements on the client's needs for parenting skills and anger management counseling as part of her treatment plan. This part of the original case was written with vague language and left many students confused about what methods to use with the client's treatment. Revisions were made to the case to make this clearer.

Regarding the case and progress notes document, many students asked for more information on Maxine and less information on the other people in her life. The case was written with too many descriptions of Maxine's family and friends and not enough on the actual client. For this reason, the students struggled to find enough material to write about for this assignment. These changes were also implemented into the case.

Some suggested changes were not made for two reasons. First, in some cases revisions to the assignments were made instead of changing the case. An example of these revisions was omitting unnecessary questions on the assignments, such as the admittance dates, social security number, exact address of the client, and more. Second, it was

important not to include every detail about Maxine, since the students needed to explore aspects of the client's life in a creative way. This created a more realistic experience, since real clients would not simply tell the social worker every detail of their lives in the order that is required on the documents. If all details were provided, student empowerment would be partially lost, since students who engage in the client case material will more easily learn to write for agency practice on their own. For instance, ideas for Maxine's exact goals were not given so the students could practice making relevant suggestions using their own creativity and knowledge.

Discussion

Since a majority of the students were mostly pleased with the new case, it is presumed that the changes in the case were effective. This is particularly true after the implemented changes were made, since students stated that they would have been able to more easily complete the documents if these changes had been made to the original case. There were many important changes made to the case, so it is now more tailored to fit the needs of the course in the future.

According to Falk and Ross' (2001) purposes of documentation, the students in this study learned the reasoning behind agency documentation, as well as personal skills which will help them in practice. First, the students learned empathy as they viewed Maxine's life through her eyes. The students had to write from the perspective of a social worker who truly wanted to help Maxine through various assessments, goals, and client meetings.

Second, the participating students learned how to describe their clients on the intake and biopsychosocial documents. They learned to write without bias, to personify the client, and to promote professional communication with their clients and other colleagues through

their documentation. These skills could also be used on other documentation in the profession, as they are vital to the field.

Third, when writing the Plan of Care/Goal documents and Case/Progress Notes, the students learned how to analyze the client's situation and current needs. This included learning how to allow Maxine to guide the goals and progress, thus empowering the client and not the worker. In addition, the students were able to gain organizational and critical thinking skills which could be used to problem solve and plan goals for clients.

Fourth, the students learned the importance of accountability when documenting. They were taught to consider who would be reading the documents (such as clients, colleagues, and other professionals) before composing them, as well as how to choose only the necessary details when writing the case notes. In addition, the students wrote letters of advocacy, e-mails and memos of collegial correspondence, and termination documents. Since all of these documents could be summoned to court, supervisors, other agencies, clients, and others, the students realized the importance of being accountable for how each document is worded.

The students in the study were given the opportunities that were previously mentioned as lacking in BSW programs. The Writing for Agency Practice course involves completing documents directly from area agencies, thus allowing them to practice writing for the field before their internships and/or careers. Since the students also participated in peer review sessions and had the option to revise their assignments, they were empowered to work with each other and learn how to collaborate with colleagues regarding documentation.

Since the study was found to improve the client case, it in turn enhanced the course. The client case is the basis of the course, since almost all of the document assignments involve writing about Maxine. Without the revisions, the students would have been unable to complete the documents in a fully professional and complete manner. Therefore, developing the client case further prepared students in the course for their future careers in social work.

Limitations

There were three limitations in this study. First, the fact that the researcher had already taken the course is important to note. This created a bias towards how the client case was written to fit the documents used in class.

Another limitation was the participation level. As the semester continued, many students stopped turning in questionnaires. This dwindling participation was expected, however, and student responses were still considered valuable despite the number of questionnaires that were completed.

Another limitation is the fact that grades and the participation in the study were kept separate. The researcher did not know how the study participants performed in the class. Because of this, no relations can be drawn between the students' opinions of the case and how well they were able to complete the final documents for the course.

Recommendations for Future Study

Student input in the social work writing process is of utmost importance when considering how to teach BSW writing courses. Since the students in this study had a chance to actually implement changes into an existing university course, they had an opportunity to make a difference. This process enabled students to be empowered in a

number of ways, including: the way they learn to write documents for practice; in how to search for relevant material within client cases when writing reports in agencies; and in their confidence in their writing skills. Since these aspects of learning to write for agency practice are so vital, more studies should be performed on this topic, including those which test the effectiveness of teaching methods. In addition, more qualitative studies which ask for student viewpoints would be beneficial to those developing and implementing BSW level writing courses.

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