



# From Good to Great: An Innovative Bridge Program Developing Professionalism and Self-Reflection in Social Work Students Entering the Field

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## Introduction

Professional education lies at the heart of social work and serves as the basis for the field's commitment to developing professional social workers. A vital part of that commitment is field education. According to the *2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), field education is the *signature pedagogy* of social work education. Signature pedagogy is a central form of instruction and learning to socialize students to perform the role of the practitioner (CSWE, 2008, p. 8). Field education serves this specific purpose of linking classroom theory to practice. One of the most pressing challenges in recent years for many undergraduate and graduate programs is the shift in student demographics as it relates to student populations who seek degrees in social work. An increasing number of social work students in recent decades are first-generation college students, who often may lack some of the expected social awareness skills needed to be successful in the field (Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2018).

## First-Generation College Student

A first-generation college student is a student who is an undergraduate or graduate student whose parents have little or no college experience (Petty, 2014). While there

have always been first-generation students, in recent years this student population has been a growing topic of concern that has caught the attention of faculty, field directors, and field instructors. First-generation students in the twenty-first century tend to share specific characteristics. Many come from low-income families that are often single female-headed, are less prepared academically for college, and are often from ethnic minority groups who have historically faced racial barriers towards social mobility and success within the United States (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Davis, 2010; Derezotes, 2014; Jha, 2002).

As a result of some of these socio-historical factors and their residual effects, often first-generation students are not adequately prepared to enter the field, which results in field displacements due to a student's lack of understanding or exposure to professional life experiences and expectations outside of their immediate or intermediate environments from which they originated (Banks-Santilli, 2014). Banks-Santilli (2014) contends that students often have been acculturated to communicate and deal effectively only with people in their crowd, their neighborhood, and perhaps only in their own family or ethnic group before attending college. As a result, students arrive profoundly cultured and are then asked to join a new community that might challenge their preconceptions of others. The transition from a college or university setting to a field setting can often be bumpy for all college students, especially first-generation students. The things learned in a classroom often cannot adequately translate to the real world of work. In addition to "book smarts," schools of social work have a responsibility to prepare students, particularly first-generation students, for the challenges associated with being in a field setting (Banks-Santilli, 2014).

### **Origins of Professionalism in Social Work**

Often the discussion on professionalism in social work seems tangential to students as they struggle to understand precisely what is expected of them in the field. Social work and the profession have come a long way, yet it is somewhat of a new profession having its professional origins with the rise of the industrial era and all the issues that arose from that new world order. Abraham Flexner revolutionized professional education by publishing a report on medical education (Rice & Richlin, 1993). In that report, Flexner advocated for hierarchical stages of professional education divided into two stages, the preclinical/theory and the clinical, which reflected the division between theory, research, and practice. Rice and Richlin (1993) stated that this recommendation of stratified, research-based programs initiated the movement of schools of professional education into the research university realm for many professions, including medicine, law, dentistry, and social work. Schools of professional education

continue to utilize this stratified structure of learning, often having foundational courses before practice-oriented courses or concurrently.

Currently, the Council on Social Work Education requires all accredited schools of social work to prepare and socialize social work students utilizing nine competencies and thirty-one practice behaviors (CSWE, 2015a). While all of the competencies and practice behaviors are equally important, Competency 1: “Demonstrate ethical and professional behaviors,” is often a challenge for students to comprehend fully. Most of the field-related concerns shared by field instructors to this writer focused on this competency. Mainly, field instructors cited practice behavior #4, which discusses “the use of reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations” and practice behavior # 5, “demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communication” as areas in need of improvement on students’ field evaluations. Likewise, most of the field placement disruptions observed by this writer stemmed from some infraction in one or both of these practice behaviors embedded within Competency 1.

### **Learning Theories and Concurrent Model of Field Education**

Many social work programs use the concurrent model of social work education as its primary instructional modality where students take courses in theory and research while simultaneously being in the field. The concurrent model is supported by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1969). Bandura’s observational learning components parallel well with instructional strategies that are utilized in MSW academic programs of field practicum experiences, role-playing in the classroom, and skills labs, all of which are attached to didactic lectures. While in theory, this appears to be an excellent model to help bridge the gap between practice and theory, all too often there is a disconnect between what the scholars teach and what practitioners expect around professionalism of students when they enter the field. To address this dichotomy around the perceptions of what constitutes professionalism in the field, this author believed there was a need for a collaborative approach between the school and the field to address two concerns. The first concern was to bring greater awareness to what field instructors expect of students entering the field. The second concern was to increase students’ awareness of the professional skills and demeanor needed to be successful while in the field (CSWE, 2015b).

To better understand the best approach to accomplish this goal, this writer sought to use the Collaborative Learning Theory by Kenneth Bruffee (1999), and Peer Learning

strategies as discussed by Boud, Cohen, and Sampson (2001). Collaborative Learning Theory suggests that ideal learning is more than just transferring of foundational knowledge from professor to the student for content knowledge (Bruffee, 1999). Bruffee (1999) advocated a new paradigm for learning, collaborative learning, which included opportunities for non-foundational learning. Furthermore, Bruffee (1999) categorized learning as foundational or non-foundational based on the content of the knowledge. Foundational learning was defined as facts and information that is articulated and known by all participants. In social work education, this would be considered the theory. Non-foundational learning was defined as personal and individual changes that occur because of the discourse, such as one's worldview or value system in interaction with the broader macro system. In this case, this was considered the field in which students did their practicums.

Bruffee's (1999), premise is that students attending institutions of higher education bring with them their culture and their familiar ways of doing things. One task of social work education is to re-acculturate students into the learning environment whereby social work students can reconcile their preconceived ideas and expand their worldviews. Bruffee (1999) stated that new learning is accomplished not solely by readings or lectures, but by having conversations with others. Bruffee (1999) referred to these conversations as "boundary conversations," meaning students engage with each other at the point between their worldview and the other's worldview.

The community to which an individual is socialized contributes to the development of one's worldview. Thus, the two individuals are communicating at the boundaries of their known worldviews. Through these conversations, each begins to look at the other's worldview and challenge their tacit knowledge. Bruffee (1999) described the content of boundary conversations as non-judgmental discourse as the two individuals discuss and share ideas openly to develop new knowledge or an understanding of each other's worldview. Bruffee (1999) promotes the view that "knowledge is developed through a shared consensus: it is something people construct interdependently by talking together to form a consensus or understanding towards a given situation" (Bruffee, 1999, p. 14).

Boud et al. (2001) emphasize Peer Learning as a strategy to develop boundary conversations. Peer Learning refers to the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher. It suggests a two-way, reciprocal learning activity. Peer Learning should be mutually beneficial and involve the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and experience between the participants. It can be described as a way of moving beyond independent

to interdependent or mutual learning (Boud, 1988; Boud et al., 2001). Students learn a great deal by explaining their ideas to others and by participating in activities in which they can learn from their peers.

### **Innovative Approach of Infusing Professionalism in Field Education**

A bridge program titled *The Whitney M. Young, Jr., Practicum Institute of Professional Development* (WMYJPIPD) was developed from the literature review presented and subsequent discussions with field instructors, faculty, and students. The WMYJPIPD bridge program was developed to increase student awareness of the need for reflection, self-regulation, and the demonstration of a professional demeanor and behaviors while in the field. Field instructors, recent alumni, and the director of field education jointly planned, coordinated, and facilitated the institute at the beginning of the fall semester. The WMYJPIPD bridge program occurs two weeks before all foundation-year MSW students and all BSW generalist students enter the field.

#### **WMYJPIPD Bridge Program Components**

A series of six workshops were developed and occurred over a period of three days at the beginning of the fall semester.

**Workshop #1:** *Understanding field instructors' expectations of students entering the field.* The objective of this workshop was to orient students to expectations around being active participants and observers in the learning process while in the field.

**Workshop #2:** *Making a good first impression while building your professional brand.* The objective of this workshop was to increase students' awareness of the importance of first impressions in the process of building professional relationships and developing appropriate professional networks while in the field.

**Workshop #3:** *The use of Emotional Intelligence in the field.* The objective of this workshop was to help students identify, understand, use, and manage emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, and overcome challenges while in the field.

**Workshop #4:** *Navigating and managing conflict while in the field.* The objective of this workshop was to help students understand, manage, and defuse situations of potential conflict while in the field.

**Workshop #5:** *Self-care in the field.* The objective of this workshop was to teach students how to be active advocates for themselves by identifying and developing their rituals for self-care while in the field.

**Workshop #6:** *Know thy-self: True Colors personality and temperament exercise.* The objective of this workshop was to help students understand and appreciate the characteristics of self and others for better professional relationships with their field instructors and peers while in the field.

Students were required to wear business casual attire and a list with examples of what was considered business casual attire was provided to students before the institute occurred. The last day of the institute culminated in celebratory activities, refreshments, and certificates of completion for program participants. Each of the workshops included activities that fostered student engagement between and among students and field instructors, thus increasing their interactions with each other to facilitate peer learning and “boundary conversations” around their diverse individualized worldviews and expectations for the field. At the end of the institute, students were asked to complete a survey designed to capture their opinions about the content knowledge and their satisfaction with each workshop within the bridge program. The survey sought their opinions of how much the institute helped towards increasing their readiness for field and their awareness around professionalism and professional behaviors needed to be successful while in the field. Likewise, field instructors were also surveyed at the end of the academic year. The survey sought to ascertain their opinions regarding the impact of the bridge program on their foundation-year MSW and BSW generalist students’ performance in the field as it related to their professional demeanor, attitudes, reflection, and self-regulation skills while in the field. Descriptive statistics were employed along with measures of central tendency and frequency distribution with SPSS to evaluate and interpret the program outcomes for effectiveness and continuous improvement.

### **Program Evaluation and Outcomes**

Two survey instruments were used. The first instrument used was a semi-structured summative evidence-based workshop participant evaluation adopted from the Ontario HIV Treatment Network (OHTN). OHTN is a nonprofit organization with a mission to improve the health and lives of people living with and at risk of HIV by using data and evidence to drive change (Ontario HIV Treatment Network, n.d.). This evidence-based instrument was chosen because the OHTN workshop participant survey has empirical research supporting its efficacy in evaluating community-based training workshops

and their associated activities. The survey was modified to meet the evaluative needs of the bridge program. The instrument consisted of 16 items. Data was collected from 90 students ( $N=90$ ): seventy foundation-year MSW students and twenty BSW generalist students in their senior year. The survey solicited responses from the participants on their perceptions of the WMYJPIPD bridge program on the following dimensions: overall satisfaction, workshops structure and content, training outcomes, and overall effectiveness of the workshops as it related to their readiness to enter the field.

The second instrument was a semi-structured survey sent via SurveyMonkey™ to 50 field instructors at the end of the academic year. The instrument consisted of 8 items. Twenty-seven field instructors ( $N=27$ ) responded.

Students who participated in the WMYJPIPD bridge program appear to have found value in the workshops as all ( $N=90$ ) reported the workshops were either “excellent” or “good” overall (Table 1).

**Table 1 - How would you rate the workshops overall?**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Excellent	59	65.56
Good	31	34.44
Fair	0	0
Poor	0	0
<i>Total</i>	90	100

Table 2 indicates that the majority of students (64.44%) reported a change in their perception regarding the importance of always demonstrating a professional demeanor while in the field.

**Table 2 - Has your perception changed regarding the need for the demonstration of professionalism and a professional demeanor while in the field?**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
A Great Deal	58	64.44
Somewhat	19	21.11
Not Much	9	10.00
Not At All	4	4.44
<i>Total</i>	90	100

More than three-fourths of the students (76.67%) reported that because of the bridge program their perceptions had changed a great deal regarding a need for greater reflection and self-regulation to complete their field placements successfully (Table 3).

**Table 3 - Has your perception changed regarding a need to have a greater sense of reflection and self-regulation to complete the field successfully?**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
A Great Deal	69	76.67
Somewhat	14	15.56
Not Much	4	4.44
Not At All	3	3.33
<i>Total</i>	90	100

Likewise, more than three-fourths of the students (77.78%) reported that 81 to 100 percent of what was presented in the workshops would be useful to their success once they began their field practicum (Table 4).

**Table 4 - How much of the information presented in the workshops will be usable to you in the field?**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
81-100%	70	77.78
61-80%	13	14.44
21-60%	6	6.67
0-20%	1	1.11
<i>Total</i>	90	100

Twenty-seven surveys were collected from field instructors via SurveyMonkey™. Field instructors were asked to give their opinion of how useful the WMYJPIPD bridge program was to their foundation-year MSW or BSW generalist students' ability to transition into their agency settings while managing their personal feelings and expectations. As indicated in Table 5, all respondents reported that the bridge program was at least slightly useful in improving students' ability to transition into agency settings while managing their personal feelings and expectations of being in the field.

**Table 5 - In your opinion, how useful was the bridge program for your foundation-year MSW or BSW generalist students' ability to transition into your agency setting while managing their personal feelings and expectations while in the field?**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Extremely Useful	6	22.22
Very Useful	6	22.22
Moderately Useful	10	37.04
Slightly Useful	5	18.52
Not Useful	0	0
<i>Total</i>	27	100

### Conclusion

Several practical outcomes can be mentioned. First, the feedback from students indicated the WMYJPIPD bridge program, targeted on infusing professionalism into social work education, achieved its overall outcome goal of increasing student awareness of the need for reflection, self-regulation, and the demonstration of a professional demeanor while in the field. Second, field instructors tended to rate practicum students who participated in WMYJPIPD bridge program as having had a better than average knowledge-of-self while in the field. Third, field instructors rated the bridge program as generally useful in preparing foundation-year MSW and BSW generalist students in their transition into the agency setting, while managing their personal feelings and expectations of their field experience. Lastly, students reported that 81 to 100 percent of the information that they received from the workshops during the bridge program would be usable to them once they began the field.

In sum, according to Toros and Medar (2015), the field of social work is complex and full of challenges and social work education has accepted this responsibility to prepare students for this work theoretically. Significant effort must be taken to better prepare students practically for the challenges and demands they may encounter while in the field. First-generation social work students specifically, and other students generally, need to be supported to foster reflection and self-regulation while in the field and beyond (Hadwin, Järvelä, & Miller, 2018).

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**Workshop agendas/outlines are available upon request.**