

Cultivating reflexivity in social work students: A course-based experience

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Abstract: Social work educators are concerned about how best to equip social work students with the ability to self-reflect, because this is a core professional competence. The present study employed both quantitative and qualitative means to evaluate a course which set out to foster reflexivity among social work undergraduates. A quasi-experimental design was employed to examine the effectiveness of the course. Data were collected at pre-course, post-course, and 6 months after completion. We found that, over time, students in the experimental group gained more insight. The students disclosed in focus group interviews that the course had enhanced their understanding toward self, family, and society. The implications for social work education are discussed.

Keywords: reflexivity; evidence-based social work education

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Acknowledgement: The research is supported by the Leung Kau Kui Research and Teaching Endowment Fund of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China.

Introduction

The mission of the social work profession is to enhance people's well-being through promoting social change, strengthening relationships, and helping those in need (Social Workers Registration Board, 2010; The International Federation of Social Workers, 2000, July). The most valuable instrument by which a social work professional can achieve this mission is his or her own self (Yalom, 2002). Social workers believe that they can facilitate and support clients' self-actualisation and growth by relating to them in a spontaneous, genuine, and authentic manner (Curran, Seashore, & Welp, 1995). Such qualities of social workers might be cultivated from their own experiences of self-actualization, Baldwin (2000) conceptualises the self of the helping professional as 'the funnel through which theories and techniques become manifest' (p. xix). The self is an important component in the act of helping. However, it is not uncommon for a client's life story and predicament to raise personal issues for a social worker and trigger strong emotions that block him or her from having real contact with the client (Mandell, 2007; Ruch, 2000; Yip, 2006). This can affect both the assessment and intervention of a therapeutic process. Hence, it is important for social work educators to enhance students' awareness of how students themselves, including their culture, values, attitudes, and biases, influence their practice. In 2008, a course titled 'Knowing ourselves, knowing our world' was developed as part of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme at The University of Hong Kong, with the goal of increasing the reflexivity of first-year undergraduates. Following the pilot study that evaluated the course offered in 2008 (Chow, Lam, Leung, Wong, & Chan, 2011), we tried to take a step forward in course evaluation by comparing the scores of the students in 2009 with those of a comparison group. Moreover, focus group interviews were conducted to understand the impact of this course on the social work students. This paper reports the findings of this new evaluation of the effectiveness of the 2009 course at promoting the reflexivity of students.

Reflexivity

Being raised in the Chinese culture, most of us were brought up in a Confucian-heritage environment which emphasizes correct knowledge and respect for authority, in particular the superior role of teacher (Ho & Ho, 2008). Being used to the passive mode of learning through accepting traditional knowledge without questioning it, the bombardment by the social work professional training on autonomy and critical thinking inspires us. Reflective thinking towards existing traditional knowledge is part of the reflexivity, but was missing in our earlier days of education. When we took up the teacher role in social work education, we deliberately highlight this as our major focus and hope to support the students to cultivate this overlooked quality.

Definition of reflexivity

The term 'reflexivity' is a social science concept that highlights the influence of the self in research and practice (Fook, 2002). In a recent review of the literature on reflexivity, Ixer (2010) pointed out that a number of theorists had contributed to the definition of this concept. Rennie (2004, p. 183) described reflexivity as 'self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness ... the ability to think about our thinking and our feeling, to have a feeling about a feeling, to have a desire about a desire, and that this self-awareness flows into action'. Taylor and White (2000) perceived reflexivity as playing an active role in the knowledge-making process. They defined reflexivity as an ability to examine the knowledge used to make sense of ambiguous and complex situations in practice.

Fook and Gardner (2007) further expanded the reflexivity concept. They pointed out that all human aspects, including bodily and psychological states, age, past experiences, social position, and culture, have an effect on what is selected as the focus of attention. This selection influences the way knowledge is perceived and created, so reflexive practitioners have to understand 'who [we are] as a whole being (social, emotional, physical, cultural, economic, political)' (p. 29).

The terms 'reflexivity' and 'reflectivity' are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature. Kondrat (1999) clarified the concepts by distinguishing between 'reflective self-awareness' and 'reflexive self-awareness'. Reflective self-awareness means that a person's cognitions,

emotions, and behaviours are treated as if they are objects for evaluation and reflection. The conceptualisation of reflective self-awareness conveys the existence of two parts of the self – the reflecting-self and the object-self. The reflecting-self of a practitioner is expected to step back from the object-self, and then scrutinise the values, attitudes, and interactions of the object-self with service-users. However, Kondrat challenges the existence of objectivity, and disagrees that the reflecting-self takes a privileged position because all clinical interactions contain ‘some aspect of the clinician’s self’ (p. 459). Kondrat proposes that the reflecting-self and the object-self share the same social and historical context. Therefore, practitioners must come to understand what shapes their frames of reference that guide their perception, interpretation, sense-making, and behaviour when facing human complexities.

In their review of the concept of reflexivity in the social work literature, D’Cruz *et al.* (2007) came up with three variations of this concept. The first kind of reflexivity refers to people’s making sense of the social situation and social problems, which facilitates their decision-making with regard to their life choices. The second kind refers to reflexivity on knowledge. Practitioners have to be conscious that power plays a part in knowledge generation. From a social constructionist perspective, the self contributes to knowledge creation, thus social workers have to examine how their personal stories affect meaning construction when interacting with clients and be curious about the assumptions behind formal and practice theories. The third kind of reflexivity refers to reflexivity on the dynamic relationship between thoughts and feelings. D’Cruz *et al.* pointed out that emotion is an anchor through which social workers can deepen their self-understanding. These sensory and perceptual reactions reflect the tacit knowledge that is used by social workers to make sense of a situation. Instead of distancing and repressing our emotional responses, D’Cruz *et al.* suggested that it be honoured as this is a cue for continuous self-exploration. This three-level approach to reflexivity was adopted when designing our course. But we placed particular emphasis on reflexivity towards self as we believe that better knowledge of self is the foundation for reflexivity of self with regard to knowledge and social problems (see Chow *et al.* (2011) for the conceptual framework and the details of the course).

Strategies for developing reflexivity

Rennie (2004) pointed out that to develop reflexivity, introspection, which involves reflecting from the viewpoint of an individual, is essential but not sufficient. He suggested that sharing our views with other people is a way to deepen self-understanding. Meaning-making is interactional and also contextual. Prpic (2005) proposed three viewpoints of reflexive practice, namely the intra-, inter- and trans-views. The intra-view is introspection through which people may gain a new understanding toward self. The inter-view is the process of interpersonal dialogue and discussion. The trans-view refers to the collective norms that contextualise the intra-view and inter-view. This view echoes the reflexivity on social problems and knowledge proposed by Cruz *et al.* (2007). Prpic's views guided our planning of teaching strategies. We emphasised students' self-reflection, engaged students in group discussions and interactions, and requested them to reflect critically on social issues.

The course: 'Knowing ourselves, knowing our world'

Course objectives

This course aims to promote the reflexivity of first-year social work students. We believe that social workers' perception of the difficulties faced by clients and of problems in society are shaped by their upbringing, life experiences, and culture. Thus, we deem it important to equip social work students with reflexivity at the start of their professional training. The specific objectives were:

- To enhance students' self-reflection (reflexivity of self with self);
- To enhance students' openness to knowledge (reflexivity of self with knowledge); and
- To widen students' perspective for understanding social problems (reflexivity of self with social problems).

Course content

In this course, students are guided to explore their personal selves, and their relationships with their family and society as a whole. The course moves from considering the inner self to considering the outer community. At the start, students are guided to examine the physical, cognitive, and affective aspects of themselves. They experience their bodily sensations, and look at their own values, their strengths and weaknesses, and their attitudes towards intimacy and loss. To grasp the powerful influence of the family on one's personal development, they are also guided to review their own family's structure, norms, values, and dynamics, and to connect with their current values and behaviours. To develop awareness of the connection between the individual and the social environment, students are required to investigate a social phenomenon that interests them and make a presentation to the class on it. They are encouraged to reflect on how they would think and/or act differently, having gained more knowledge of the issue concerned. Issues explored by students include cyber bullying, speed dating, gambling, fair trade, and the social perception of beauty.

Mode of teaching

The course runs for 3 months and contains a total of 12 lectures, each of which lasts for 2½ hours. Small group teaching (around 10 students in each group) is used to provide more time and space for students to share their thoughts and feelings. One teacher is responsible for leading one group, so training for all groups can be run simultaneously. The objectives of each lecture and the teaching activities are jointly set.

Role of the teachers

The course is led by full-time clinical teachers, all of whom are Registered Social Workers with more than 5 years of frontline experience and a master's or higher degree. The teachers act as architects and facilitators of the group process. Since they are experienced social workers, they are

sensitive to group dynamics and to the emotional readiness of students in the sharing process. They are also conscious of ensuring a safe and secure environment for the training as this is a prerequisite for students to open up and reflect on their personal issues.

Course evaluation

One of the objectives of the evaluation was to examine the effectiveness of the course at enhancing the reflexivity of first-year social work students. A quasi-experimental design was used, including both an experimental group (social work freshmen) and a comparison group (year-one social science students). Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires at three time points: at the start of the first lecture, which served as the baseline (T_1 : January, 2009); at the end of the last lecture (T_2 : April, 2009); and 6 months after the end of the course (T_3 : September, 2009).

The second objective was to explore the impact of the course on the students. To achieve this objective, focus group interviews were held right after the course to capture the social work freshmen's subjective views of the course.

Surveys

First, we hypothesised that over time, the experimental group would demonstrate growth in reflexivity, specifically in terms of engagement in self-reflection, perceived need for self-reflection, and insight gained from self-reflection. Second, we speculated that there would be no change in reflexivity for the comparison group at the three time points.

Participants

The experimental group consisted of 39 first-year students in the BSW programme. The course was compulsory for all of them, but participation in the survey was voluntary. All 39 students were willing to participate, but two of them were not included in the final analysis because too many data about them were missing.

To recruit participants into our comparison group, we publicised and promoted our research to social science freshmen in the social work

disciplinary elective courses. At the outset, 25 Bachelor of Social Sciences students participated in the study. However, only 12 completed the whole process, making up 48% of the sample at T₁.

Data collection

As the participants were students of the University, we had to make sure that their participation in this study was voluntary. To avoid the influence of authority as the teachers, the study was administered by an independent research assistant. A consent form which emphasized their voluntary participation was given out to the students. Ethical approval had been sought from the University Human Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Faculties before the data collection.

With the experimental group, the research assistant explained about the objectives and procedures of the study to the students in the first lecture of the course. The principles of voluntary participation and no adverse effect for non-participation were emphasized. The teacher concerned left the room when the research assistant distributed the consent forms and questionnaire of T₁. Similarly, the questionnaires of T₂, and T₃ were collected by the research assistant at the end of the course and the first lecture of a core course in the following semester respectively. No teachers were in the room when these questionnaires were distributed and collected.

As for the comparison group, one of the authors and the research assistant went to the first lecture of core courses of other social science programmes to explain about the study. The two principles stressed in the experimental group briefing were stated clearly in the comparison group. The author also emphasized that, though there would be no direct benefit to the comparison group, the study would help to inform teachers about how to improve their teaching quality.

Measuring tools

The questionnaire was composed of some questions asking for basic personal information such as age and gender, and the Self-reflection and Insight Scale (SRIS), which was used to measure respondents' engagement in self-reflection, perceived need for self-reflection, and insight (Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002). This is a 20-item scale, with two factors, namely self-reflection (SRIS-SR, 12 items) and insight (SRIS-IN, 8 items). As stated by Grant *et al.*, self-reflection can be further classified into two sub-dimensions: engagement in self-reflection (SRIS-SRE) and need for self-reflection (SRIN-SRN). Insight refers to the clarity of understanding

of one's 'thoughts, feelings and behaviour' (Grant *et al.*, 2002, p. 821). Each subscale uses a six-point scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-reflection and/or insight. Grand *et al.* (2002) reported that the Cronbach's alpha of the SRIS-SR ranged from 0.71 to 0.91, and that of the SRIS-IN from 0.82 to 0.87. In our study, the Cronbach's alphas of the SRIS-SR and SRIS-IN were 0.87 and 0.75, respectively. For the sub-dimensions of the SRIS-SR, the Cronbach's alphas of the SRIS-SRE and SRIS-SRN were 0.72 and 0.83, respectively.

Findings

We compared the demographic profile and test scores of those who had completed the study with those who had dropped out by using chi-square and Mann-Whitney *U* tests. We found that there was no statistically significant difference between these two groups in terms of gender, age, or the SRIS scores.

The experimental group consisted of 37 respondents, 12 (32.4%) of whom were male and 25 (67.6%) female. Their average age was 20.14 years. The comparison group was composed of four males (33.3%) and eight females (66.7%). The average age of those in the comparison group was 20.67 years. The homogeneity of the experimental and comparison groups at the baseline was assessed. The only difference found in these two groups by the Mann-Whitney *U* tests was in the SRIS-SRN score ($z = -2.09$, $p = .04$). The experimental group had an average rank of 27.42, while the comparison group had an average rank of 17.54. The comparison group perceived a lower need for self-reflection, though their engagement in self-reflection and insight were comparable to that of the experimental group.

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables are shown in Tables 1 and 2. To assess the change in SRIS scores over time, one-way repeated-measures ANOVAs were used for the experimental group. Mauchly's tests on the SRIS-SR, SRIS-SRE, SRIS-SRN, and SRIS-IN indicated that the assumption of sphericity had not been violated. A significant change in the SRIS-IN scores was found in the experimental group (Table 2). Post hoc comparisons indicated that there was an increase in the SRIS-IN mean score from T_1 to T_2 ($p = 0.003$) and from T_1 to T_3 ($p < 0.005$), and both of them were statistically significant. Though there was a rise in the SRIS-IN mean score from T_2 to T_3 , the post hoc test showed that it was not statistically significant ($p = 0.308$). This indicated that the students in the experimental group had gains in insight immediately after the course. Though they had gain in insights

Table 1
Correlations of the SRIS sub-scales (n = 49)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. T ₁ -SRIS-SR	-										
2. T ₁ -SRIS-SRE	.91***	-									
3. T ₁ -SRIS-SRN	.92***	.68***	-								
4. T ₁ -SRIS-IN	.32*	.33*	.26	-							
5. T ₂ -SRIS-SR	.73***	.67***	.68***	.21	-						
6. T ₂ -SRIS-SRE	.73***	.74***	.61***	.58*	.93***	-					
7. T ₂ -SRIS-SRN	.62***	.48***	.65***	.11	.92***	.71***	-				
8. T ₂ -SRIS-IN	.51***	.51***	.43**	.66***	.50***	.55***	.37**	-			
9. T ₃ -SRIS-SR	.67***	.58***	.65***	.34*	.74***	.67***	.70***	.43**	-		
10. T ₃ -SRIS-SRE	.64***	.58***	.59***	.39**	.69***	.67***	.62***	.45**	.95***	-	
11. T ₃ -SRIS-SRN	.63***	.52***	.64***	.25	.69***	.59***	.70***	.35*	.94***	.78***	-
12. T ₃ -SRIS-IN	.49***	.44**	.47**	.56***	.47**	.46**	.42**	.66***	.68***	.69***	.59***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2
Compare the SRIS Scores at Three Time Points

	Experimental Group (n = 37)			ANOVAS
	Mean (SD) at T ₁	Mean (SD) at T ₂	Mean (SD) at T ₃	
Self-reflection (SRIS-SR)	51.00 (8.50)	53.24 (8.61)	52.97 (7.31)	F(2,72) = 2.73 p = 0.072
Engagement in self-reflection (SRIS-SRE)	24.81 (4.48)	26.11 (4.88)	25.92 (4.00)	F(2,72) = 2.74 p = 0.072
Perceived need for self-reflection (SRIS-SRN)	26.19 (4.75)	27.14 (4.44)	27.05 (3.83)	F(2,72) = 1.44 p = 0.243
Insights gained from self-reflection (SRIS-IN)	29.14 (5.16)	31.46 (5.86)	32.30 (5.31)	F(2,72) = 8.68 p = < 0.001
	Comparison Group (n = 12)			
				Chi-square
Self-reflection (SRIS-SR)	46.42 (8.50)	47.25 (10.17)	47.17 (9.42)	$\chi^2(2) = 0.522$ p = 0.770
Engagement in self-reflection (SRIS-SRE)	23.33 (4.77)	23.58 (5.90)	23.25 (5.01)	$\chi^2(2) = 0.565$ p = 0.754
Perceived need for self-reflection (SRIS-SRN)	23.08 (4.66)	23.67 (5.25)	23.92 (4.91)	$\chi^2(2) = 0.844$ p = 0.656
Insights gained from self-reflection (SRIS-IN)	32.00 (6.40)	29.25 (7.59)	29.33 (6.05)	$\chi^2(2) = 4.696$ p = 0.096

in the following 6 months, the increase was not statistically significant, still it implied that the insight level was able to be maintained after 6 months. In view of the small sample size of the comparison group, the Friedman test was used to track changes in this group. Results indicated that there was no change in the SRIS scores over time.

Focus groups

Aside from collecting quantitative data from the participants of the experimental group, qualitative data was collected through focus group at T_2 . We believe that some changes in students after taking the course and the process of change may not be captured by quantitative measurements. The qualitative data can act as complementary information, which are of equal importance for improving the course. The consent of participation in the focus group was obtained at the same time when the study was introduced to the participants at the first lecture. The decision to use focus groups as a data collection method was made after careful consideration. From the ethical point of view, the non-participation of individual student might be easily identified, thus the principle of voluntary participation might be challenged. So we introduced administrative measures to avoid the exploitation of power as teachers. Firstly, all the focus groups were led by teachers not teaching the course. Secondly, all the participants were asked not to mention any names in the focus group discussion. Thirdly, instead of being able to access to the video-tape, the teachers were only accessible to the transcription, which were prepared by one of the focus group members with the regular payment for the task by the Department. To reduce the unavoidable comparison between the teachers of the four groups, there was no identifying information about the group of the transcripts. The four transcripts were aggregated without any between group comparisons.

Participants and data collection

Four focus groups were organised immediately after the course (T_2). All students (12 males and 27 females) who had taken the course participated. The course teachers were not present in the focus groups, so that the students might feel free to express their views. The group interviews were conducted by other practice teachers of the Department according to an interview guide. We obtained consent from the students to record the

interviews, and one of the students in each focus group helped to transcribe the interview to ensure its accuracy.

Findings

The findings from the focus groups generally confirmed that the students gained a better understanding of themselves, and also informed us of the specific experiences of the students. They said that they gained insights into their own self, their family relationships, as well as their connection with the social world.

My past, my present, and my future

The students shared that this course had enhanced their knowledge of self. They became aware of the connections between their past and their present, and this understanding also inspired them to reflect on the future path they wanted to pursue.

Student 11: I gained much from this course. I can say that I didn't have a deep understanding toward myself.... After taking this course, I came to know that my present self is constructed by my past experiences. I started to ponder how I could construct my future. This course has given me an opportunity to explore who I am and what I want to be.

Student 12: I became aware that I seldom share my inner feelings with others. I often tell other people that I have a very positive attitude towards life. Actually, I have kept everything to myself in the past 10 years. I haven't had a chance to disclose and share. I had a traumatic experience, but I just tried to suppress it and insisted on pursuing the life I wanted, so others would see me as brave and strong. This course reminded me that I have to face the trauma squarely. I agreed that it is the right time for me to handle the grief and this step is essential for my future growth and development.

Student 23: This course has led me to much reflection. I have thought about my past and my relationship with my family. This course has triggered memories that I had nearly forgotten.... It has widened my perspectives and I have gained much from this. I used to adopt only one thinking mode but the sharing of the members of my group has expanded my horizons. I have learnt to perceive an incident from multiple points of view.

Student 20: I often relate to my friends with great enthusiasm, but I was reminded

that not all people accept that. I consider that as a good way to relate to others, but others may not feel the same way. This is a new insight for me.

My family and I in a new light

The students reported attitudinal and behavioural changes in how they related to their family. They learnt to treasure their family and were willing to make an effort to maintain family relationships.

Student 4: I seldom shared my thoughts and feelings with my family. After taking this course, I am more willing to express myself in front of them. I would rarely call my family members, but now I phone them daily. I still remember in the first lesson someone said, 'Often our behaviours conflict with what we treasure'. This sentence stimulated me to much reflection. I have learnt to express myself more in front of my family now for I don't want to regret not doing the things I want to do.

Student 5: We talked about loss in one session. [In one activity], all my family members were taken away unexpectedly; I suddenly realised that I should treasure my family. In the camp, I was very impressed by a song on family relationships; it reminded me that I have to do something to express my love to my family.

Student 7: My relationship with my father has never been that good. In this course, I came to understand what I expect from the father-child relationship. Furthermore, I am now fully aware of my present state that I still have some resistance to having more contact with him. Actually, my parents are separated and he is not living with me. I will not force myself to do anything at the moment. But I have made a promise to myself and I have confidence that sometime in the future I can do so [maintain more contact with his father]. My tutor has given me much encouragement. She said that it is alright to accept our limitations, and it is most important to become aware of our needs.

My social world and my place

The students disclosed that they were more conscious of the influences of societal values and norms on their development. Some students started to think how they could make an impact on society.

Student 24: Most of the sessions in this course focused on the self and the family. But a society is made up of many families. When my peers disclosed the difficulties and problems they encountered in their families, such as economic difficulties, I came to understand more about societal problems.

Student 21: The presentations stimulated me to reflect on the impact of society on our values and behaviours. I also thought about what I can contribute to society and the world as a social worker. This course inspired me to think more.

Student 12: The talk on global citizenship revitalised my dream to become a volunteer who seeks to improve child welfare.... I hope that I can influence society.

Discussion

The results reveal that the course is able to enhance the reflexivity of first-year social work students. In the quantitative study, there was no difference between the scores in insight subscale of the experimental group and the comparison group at the baseline. The experimental group yielded an upward gain across the three time points with statistical significant difference, while the comparison group even got a drop in scores of insight subscale, though not to the statistical significant level. The students in the experimental group, who had gone through the course, had gained a deeper and clearer understanding of their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Insight is a 'conscious meaning shift involving new connections' (Hill et al., 2007, p. 442) and it implies that people understand something from a new perspective through making new connections between people, events, and ideas. The teaching activities in the course were able to stimulate the students' insight.

Though the changes in the subscale scores of engagement in self-reflection and perceived need for self-reflection of the experimental group across time was not statistically significant, the changes were mainly in the expected direction. The lack of significant changes of engagement in self-reflections might be related to the summer vacation between T₂ and T₃. The respondents might not relate the use of self-reflection in non-study context. Probably, more emphasis on the scope of engagement in self-reflection can be elaborated in the lecture. Similarly, more discussion on the usefulness of perceived need for self-reflection can be arranged. Students of this course are actually asked to write a final paper on this topic. More feedback on the paper will be offered to further stimulate their sensitivity towards the importance of self-reflection.

In the qualitative study, the students revealed how the course had

stimulated their reflection. They gained new insights into self, their family, and the relationship between self and society through the exercises and through peer sharing. This understanding led to attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural changes.

Given the lower score of the comparison group on 'need of self-reflection', and drawing from the sharing of the students in the focus group, we speculate that the greater need for self-reflection of the social work freshmen and the milieu of the course might be two factors explaining the increase in the insight score of the experimental group.

Awareness of the need for self-reflection among social work freshmen

Though social science students who took social work elective courses might also have an interest in social issues, they might not recognise the significance of self-awareness as much as social work students, who see themselves as future practitioners. When we discussed with our social work freshmen about the rationale for being a social worker, often we learnt that they were keen to help those in need. They could see the connection between having an in-depth understanding of themselves and helping others. The difference is reflected in the baseline assessment, which shows that the social work students were more aware of the need to be self-reflective. The perceived need for self-reflection can be interpreted as a motivational factor for embarking on a journey of self-exploration. Though Lyke (2009) pointed out that the relationship between self-reflection and insight is still unclear, our findings revealed that a need for self-reflection and insight were positively correlated at T_2 and T_3 (Table 1). A person who is keener to reflect tends to have more insights.

The milieu of the course

The course was carefully designed with the objective of promoting students' reflexivity. Hill *et al.* (2007) pointed out that prerequisites for insight generation are lowering people's avoidance and defences, and educating them about the gains of having new understanding. To accomplish this, in the first lecture, we present the framework of reflexivity and its importance in social work practice. Moreover, the strategies that help to enhance

awareness are outlined. Students are encouraged to begin their journey of self-exploration according to their own pace and to decide their extent of self-disclosure. We believe that orientation and encouragement help to lower students' defences in their self-exploration as they can then maintain their sense of agency in the reflexive process.

The design of the course is guided by D'Cruz *et al.*'s (2007) three-level approach to reflexivity. The emphasis is mostly on reflexivity of self with self. The themes for reflection are carefully chosen, namely personal values, physical self, intimacy, loss, family, and strengths and weakness. As the students disclose their history, feelings, and thoughts, they also re-organise their experience. Trust is built through enhanced understanding among students, which facilitates further sharing and stimulation.

In the words of Hill and his colleagues (2007), we need to trigger students' 'memories, painful or puzzling stories, narratives and dreams from which insights can develop' (p. 447). Multi-media, such as games, music, and artwork, are used for this purpose. In the debriefing after each activity, the teachers guide students to connect their experiences in the activity with their real life by taking note of the episodic memories and dreams triggered, feelings and thoughts aroused, and the new discoveries they have made about the self. In the process, the facilitators help to promote students' insight through articulating their implicit assumptions, pointing out discrepancies, and building up connections between events, people, and ideas. In brief, the facilitators need to be sensitive to the emotions of students and be skilful in facilitating students' reflection.

A supportive environment and feedback from others about our thoughts and behaviours are conducive to the generation of insight. In the group discussions and sharing sessions, the students are exposed to alternative viewpoints that help to open up their ways of thinking. Also, when they hear others' stories, students may become aware that their own situation is not so bad and this may trigger their appreciation of their own self and family.

We consider that the course offers social work students a space in which to reflect, and the guidance from teachers and the exchanges among students help them to integrate their life experiences, which can contribute to a heightened level of insight. The course was not available to students in the comparison group, so they were not exposed to this program of stimulation and training in reflection. This may explain the lack of change in the SRIS scores found in the comparison group during the data collection period.

Implications

Reflexivity is a core competence of social workers. Our experiences from this course can contribute to the social work training in Hong Kong as we have demonstrated that reflexivity can, to a certain extent, be unleashed and sustained through a 3-month course. We consider structured activities and teacher's sensitivity are indispensable elements of this course to enhance student's reflexivity. Carefully designed activities, such as simulation games, music, pictures, are necessary to arouse students' memories and trigger their feelings (Halton, Murphy, & Dempsey, 2007). Students' memories and feelings are material for them to reflect. Furthermore, teachers need to be sensitive to the change in students' emotions during the activities. We observe that some students, who are experiencing intense emotions, may have difficulties to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Teachers' encouragement and guiding questions can help students to express and re-organise their experiences.

Limitations

We are also aware of the limitations of our research. First, we acknowledge that it would have been better if the study had compared social work students who have taken the course with those who have not. Nevertheless, this course is a compulsory course of year-one social work students and there are restrictions in the curriculum structure of the University which made it impossible for us to divide the students into experimental and comparison groups. We purposefully recruited social science students who took the social work disciplinary electives. These electives are offered by the Department of Social Work and Social Work Administration, so to a certain extent, the students in the comparison group had a similar learning experience to those in the experimental group. Second, the small sample size and the high drop-out rate of the comparison group are major drawbacks. Around 48% of the respondents in the comparison group were retained at T₃. It was not easy to motivate and retain these participants because the data collection period lasted for 9 months and they had to fill in the questionnaire at three time points. Third, the small sample size made it impossible for us to conduct a factor analysis of the scales. We could

only refer to the factor structures originally validated in a non-Chinese community. Despite these inadequacies, this research demonstrates an alternative mode of inquiry into the topic of reflexivity in professional education. The students appreciated the course, and we hope that other training institutes will be encouraged by our experience to conduct similar course on promoting student reflexivity.

Conclusion

There is a Chinese axiom that careful investigation is a way to attain knowledge (*ge wu zhi zhi*) (Zhang & Pan, 2001). A student gains more knowledge about the self by reflecting on and scrutinising his or her own values, beliefs, preferences, and biases, as well as ethical and moral assumptions. This understanding of the self is very important in the social work profession, both in micro and macro practice, because the self is the tool that brings forth positive changes in the well-being of service-users. We, as teachers, also need to carefully investigate alternative training strategies. Efforts to incorporate research into our teaching would help to improve teaching quality. We hope that the findings we have presented here will help in some way towards achieving this goal.

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