

# Valuing experience in a baccalaureate social work class on human behavior

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**Abstract:** Social problems are best understood through active engagement in the community, experiences that bring to light the social problems at hand. Social work education lends itself especially to practical application and experience, as addressing social welfare problems can never be entirely theoretical. Experiential education offers social work students such an opportunity, and the social work field experience offers social work students an opportunity for applied learning.

Kolb's theory of experiential adult learning, which argues that adults learn through concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, provides a useful framework for understanding the importance of experiential learning in social work education. In this paper, I discuss Kolb's contribution to adult learning theory, particularly how his theory built upon previous conceptual frameworks for understanding the adult learner. I also apply Kolb's theory to my own learning and social work education practice. Finally, I reflect upon how my own learning experiences inform my understanding of Kolb's experiential learning theory and my current perspective as a social work educator in a baccalaureate social work human behavior class in the United States.

**Keywords:** social work education; experiential learning theory; human behavior

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## Introduction

Teaching baccalaureate social work students theoretical concepts of human behavior and practical application of those concepts is a complex enterprise. According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008), baccalaureate social work education trains students as generalist practitioners capable of intervening with people facing a variety of social problems:

[Baccalaureate social work] practice is grounded in the liberal arts and the person and environment construct. To promote human and social well-being, [baccalaureate social workers] use a range of prevention and intervention methods in their practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. [The baccalaureate social worker] identifies with the social work profession and applies ethical principles and critical thinking in practice. [Baccalaureate social workers] incorporate diversity in their practice and advocate for human rights and social and economic justice. They recognize, support, and build on the strengths and resiliency of all human beings. They engage in research-informed practice and are proactive in responding to the impact of context on professional practice (pp. 7-8).

Following a year of preparatory coursework that helps the baccalaureate student develop her or his professional identity as a social worker – including ethical behavior, critical thinking, diversity, human rights, social justice, human behavior, social policy, and practice methods – undergraduate social work students complete a 400-hour field placement (College at Brockport, 2013; CSWE, 2008). The field placement is an internship whereby baccalaureate social work students serve in a variety of health, school, community, and government organizations. Field placement offers students an opportunity to practice what they have learned in the classrooms, as well as an opportunity to critically reflect upon their practice behaviors.

Developing the experience needed for working with clients on real world problems comes long before the baccalaureate social work students enter field placement. A critical foundation for practice is developed in a required course on Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE). In HBSE, students learn about human behavior across the lifespan, from biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development perspectives (CSWE, 2008). Students develop a basic understanding of normative and non-normative human behavior during infancy and toddlerhood, early and

middle childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, as well as middle and late adulthood, recognizing that conceptualizations of human behavior are culturally bound (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). HBSE courses are rich in theory and students develop an understanding of how various theories of human development, including the work of Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and other developmental theorists, inform social work practice (Hutchinson, 2013; Kirst-Ashman, 2000; van Wormer, 2007).

Because the courses on human behavior are heavy on theory, creating practical, real world application for students is critical. Baccalaureate social work education lends itself especially to practical application and experience, as addressing social welfare problems can never be entirely theoretical. Experiential learning offers undergraduate social work students this possibility, and the human behavior classroom can be an opportunity for applied learning. This paper presents several exercises that can help baccalaureate students move from a conceptual understanding of human behavior to application. Additionally, how the exercises can be used to foster an understanding of human behavior from biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual perspectives will be explored.

## **Conceptual framework: Experiential education**

The conceptual framework guiding these baccalaureate social work exercises is based upon Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential adult learning. Learning during adulthood is vastly different from learning during childhood. Whereas children require a great deal of direction, adult learning theorists such as Knowles (1980) note that adults are primarily self-directed. Baccalaureate social work students draw upon their own life experiences when they are presented with new learning tasks, and effective baccalaureate social work education recognizes that experience and reflection matter a great deal in preparing effective social workers.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory builds upon the claim that adults need meaningful classroom experiences that have direct application to the problems of everyday life. Kolb (1984) argues that learning is a 'continuous process grounded in experience' (p. 27). Experience makes up our daily lives; much of our learning experiences in life occur through everyday encounters (such as births, deaths, relationship changes) and the

classroom should build upon these experiences (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010). Meaningful experiential learning occurs when the undergraduate social work student has a direct encounter with the theoretical concepts (Jordi, 2011; Smith, 2000). This learning occurs by diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, et al., 1999; Manolis, et al., 2013). Each classroom experience offers the undergraduate social work student the opportunity to draw and build upon current and past experiences, and can enrich her or his understanding of human behavior. To facilitate through the major development phases in a baccalaureate social work course on human behavior, an experiential class journal can be used. This is an interactive document in which students share their written reflections with classroom peers, receive peer feedback, and construct written responses considering peer feedback (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Students are paired with two others in the class and remain in these groups of three throughout the four major modules on infancy and toddlerhood, early and middle childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, and middle and late adulthood. Depending upon the learning needs and interests of the class, these experiential class journals can be paper-bound paper or facilitated through course management platforms like Blackboard, Angel, Moodle, or something similar.

## **Journaling exercises**

### **Exercise 1: Infancy and toddlerhood**

**Learning objective:** Baccalaureate social work students will understand gender role socialization during infancy and toddlerhood using a diverging experiential learning approach.

Infancy and toddlerhood represent an important part of the lifespan; it is in this stage that incredible growth takes place, and a great deal of the theoretical content reflects an emphasis on the developmental milestones that occur during infancy and toddlerhood. For example, baccalaureate students learn about Piaget's theory of sensorimotor and preoperational stages of cognitive development and Erikson's theory of developmental stages including trust versus mistrust and autonomy versus shame and doubt (Hutchinson, 2013). Students also learn about gender role

socialization that occurs during infancy and toddlerhood.

The experiential exercise used in this module is focused on baccalaureate social work students with diverging learning styles who tend to value experiences like idea generation, brainstorming, and gathering information (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, et al., 1999). Prior to class, students are assigned a chapter from Colapinto's (2000) *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*. Colapinto's book tells the story of David Reimer, a man who, due to a medical condition, had sexual reassignment surgery as an infant, and was raised during the early parts of his life as a female. The book calls into question whether gender is an immutable biological characteristic or a social construct.

For this journaling exercise, students are instructed to brainstorm using approximately 500 words in her or his journal about theoretical perspectives on gender as a social construct. Because this exercise is meant to engage diverging learners, students are instructed to focus primarily on brainstorming about the various biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual perspectives on sex and gender, without necessarily endorsing any one perspective themselves. Students are given 15 minutes in class to read one of their group member's entries, discuss reactions, and provide written feedback to their peer's entry using approximately 50 words. Students are then instructed to further brainstorm, considering their peer's perspective, and revise their journal entry using around 50 additional words as homework for the week.

## Exercise 2: Early and middle childhood

**Learning objective:** Baccalaureate social work students will locate data on the impact of socioeconomic status on childhood development using an assimilating experiential learning approach.

Early and middle childhood also represents significant growth and opportunity for many children, and baccalaureate social work students continue to learn about growth and development. In addition to learning developmental theories, students learn about the sociocultural factors affecting development during early and middle childhood. During these phases, children typically enter formal education, and education is usually a social priority (Hutchinson, 2013). However, not all children are afforded equal opportunity when it comes to educational development.

This module's experiential learning exercise engages students with assimilating learning preferences. Assimilating learners value logic, concepts, and ideas, and tend to be more interested in data than people (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, et al., 1999). Prior to class, baccalaureate students are provided a website from the American Psychological Association (2013) on education and socioeconomic status. The website explores the relationship between socioeconomic status and educational success for school-aged children. This experiential journal exercise requires that students identify three independent data sources that document the relationship between socioeconomic status and educational success in school-aged children.

Students are instructed to write a journal, of about 500 words, on the state of knowledge about educational success in school-aged children, using data from reputable sources. Additionally, students reflect in writing whether there might be cultural bias in this data. For example, is there bias in the metric used to document 'educational success' for students of color? In class, students are given 15 minutes to read one of their group members' entries, discuss their reactions, and respond to their peer's journal entry using approximately 50 words. They are then asked to consider their peer's perspective, including whether there may be alternative explanations, for homework for the week.

### **Exercise 3: Adolescence and early adulthood**

**Learning objective:** Baccalaureate social work students will articulate a plan for intervening with sexual minority adolescents using a converging experiential learning approach.

Development continues in adolescence and early adulthood, and baccalaureate social work students learn about the major developmental milestones that occur during this period. Of particular importance in the discussion is the onset of puberty and different social changes that occur during adolescence, including novelty-seeking, increased risk-taking, and the need for greater affiliation with peers (Hutchinson, 2013). Relationships tend to be of primary importance to adolescents and young adults, and much of the classroom discussion focuses on the importance of peer and romantic relationships.

The experiential exercise used in this module is focused on converging

learning styles. Students with converging learning styles tend to value problem-solving and finding solutions to practical issues (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, et al., 1999). Prior to class, students are assigned to watch the film *Beautiful Thing* (Garnett, et al., 1996). *Beautiful Thing* is the story of two young men who fall in love with one another in working class London. The film also deals with other psychosocial aspects of adolescence, including bullying, domestic violence, and substance abuse.

Students are instructed to compose a 500-word narrative about how they anticipate they should intervene as the social worker of one of the boys in the film. Because students may not yet have experience working in the social service field, they are instructed to craft a solution based solely upon what they know about human behavior from the course textbook. However, students with experience in the field are invited to journal using that experience as a guide. Students are given 15 minutes of class time to read a group member's entry, discuss their reactions, and write a 50-word response. They are then instructed to revise their solution using their peer feedback, using 50 additional words as homework for the week.

#### **Exercise 4: Middle and late adulthood**

**Learning objective:** Baccalaureate social work students will discover the meaning of life review during older adulthood using an accommodating experiential learning approach.

Human development continues through middle and late adulthood. During these modules, students learn about the central developmental tasks of these periods, including the tasks of generativity versus stagnation and integrity versus despair (Hutchinson, 2013). During middle and late adulthood, adults tend to focus on passing wisdom to the next generation and reviewing their lives to assess their impact (Hutchinson, 2013). Various physical and other psychological changes associated with aging tend to become a more central part of life during middle and late adulthood.

This module's experiential learning exercise focuses on baccalaureate students with accommodating learning preferences. Accommodating learners value hands-on experiences and tend to rely more on intuition rather than logic (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, et al., 1999). For this exercise, students are assigned to complete a 50-minute informal interview with an older person to develop a sense of whether that person is successfully working

through the developmental task of integrity versus despair. The students can select a parent, grandparent, family member, or other older person in their life. Rather than a structured interview and ‘firing off questions,’ the student is encouraged to make the interview conversational and fluid. Students are encouraged to let the older person guide the direction of the interview without being too focused on outcomes or record-keeping.

Students are instructed to journal, in about 500 words, on their impressions of the interview with the older adult. In particular, students are encouraged to rely upon the ‘gut’ reactions that occurred when the older adult was sharing her or his life experiences. For example, did the student sense feelings of regret in the person they interviewed? Did the person being interviewed use language that reflected agency and purpose when talking about their life?

Students are given 15 minutes in class to read one of their group member’s entries, discuss their reactions, and provide a written response using approximately 50 words. They then consider their peer’s perspective and write a 50-word revision to their entry as homework for the week.

## **Challenges of the exercises**

Though the experiential journaling exercise in an HBSE class attempts to engage learners with various learning preferences – diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, et al., 1999) – there are some challenges to implementing the exercises. An initial challenge is that baccalaureate social work students may not be accustomed to giving one another critical yet meaningful and sensitive feedback. As a result, during the initial experiential journaling model, some students may give only superficial feedback to their peers. Conversely, when students receive critical feedback, they may respond by either shutting down or by reacting defensively to their peers. The social work educator can help address students’ reluctance to share critical feedback with one another by normalizing the experience. Giving honest feedback to one another requires a certain degree of trust, and that trust can be formed over the course of the term in the human behavior class.

Students may also be initially challenged by the volume of writing that they are expected to do as part of the journaling exercises. The human behavior course is typically offered at the beginning of the social work

degree plan, and students may not yet be accustomed to regular writing. Students may feel intimidated by the weekly journaling expectations. The social work educator can help address this by making the writing exercises low stakes. Grading the journaling exercise on a Pass/Fail basis rather than assigning a numeric or letter grade is one strategy. Students should be advised that the learning process in the journaling exercise is more important than performing perfectly or getting an 'A.' What they learn is more important than how they perform.

## **Valuing experience in the social work classroom**

Using experiential journaling exercises to engage baccalaureate social work students in critical thinking and reflection about biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual perspectives can be an effective method in the meaningful discussion of HBSE. An experiential exercise that engages students with various learning preferences, including diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, et al., 1999), helps ensure that the exercise builds upon the experience of the students themselves. Students do not come to the baccalaureate social work classroom as blank slates, but rather with valuable experiences that they can build upon through the experiential journaling exercises.

Teaching baccalaureate social work students about human behavior through experiential journaling exercises also helps prepare them for the real world problems they will encounter as part of their 400-hour field placements. Through the experiential journaling exercises, students not only learn about lifespan development content, but also gain valuable experience synthesizing theory, identifying valid data sources, problem-solving, and interviewing clients. These experiences help build the divide between social work practice method courses and the human behavior course, and they serve as the foundation for fieldwork with a variety of biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual issues with clients of various ages.

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