

The Experience of Teaching a Bachelor's Level Social Work Practice Course for the First Time in the Context of Covid-19

Teaching Note

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Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge Dr. Hannah Kia for giving feedback to this teaching note. We sincerely appreciate her support.

Equal authorship

It should be noted that both of the authors of this teaching note contributed equally to it, and that the listing of authors is alphabetical and does not reflect any disparities in lead or co-authorship.

Abstract

The scholarship on social work education currently lacks accounts of first-time experiences teaching a Bachelor's-level social work course, which is distinct in a number of respects from Master's-level education. This teaching note shared the experience of the authors teaching a Bachelor's-level social work practice course for the first time, in person, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors identified 10 key themes drawn from their experience, including: acknowledging that instructors and students can all contribute to and co-create a collaborative learning community; responding to anxieties, challenges, and mistakes; setting priorities; seeking feedback; using teaching support and resources; encouraging student engagement; acknowledging diversity; facilitating students to think critically; reflecting on the purpose of assignments and grading; and ongoing reflection on the teaching goal. It is the authors' hope that their reflections can support other social work educators teaching a Bachelor's level course for the first time.

Keywords: *Social work education; First-time teaching experience; Bachelor's-level social work course; Reflections*

Teaching a social work course for the first time can involve a steep learning curve for new social work educators. There is abundant literature on first-time experiences teaching a university course in different disciplines, such as in sociology (Meanwell & Kleiner, 2014; Smollin & Arluke, 2014), psychology (Delouche, 2019), and law (Nienaber, 2012). Meanwell and Kleiner (2014) analysed the reflections of instructors teaching sociology for the first time and found that they experienced a complex mix of emotions (e.g., finding teaching enjoyable but also feeling worry about certain outcomes). Smollin and Arluke (2014) interviewed instructors about challenges teaching sociology for the first time with participants speaking of challenges that included feeling unprepared and having to manage a high workload, as well as insights on how they handled these challenges (e.g., finding their support resources). Delouche (2019) reflected on her experience providing teaching assistance for a course in psychology for the first time and highlighted the importance of establishing relationships with the students. Nienaber (2012) gave advice to instructors teaching international law for the first time by suggesting different teaching methods such as the Socratic approach.

However, there is limited literature on this topic in social work literature. Bogo (2015) spoke about the experience of providing field education for the first time. McGranahan (2008) shared her first-time experience teaching a social work practice course at the Master's level. There is scant literature on the experience of teaching a social work course at the Bachelor's level. In this note, we will share our first-time experience teaching a Bachelor's level social work course to contribute to filling this apparent gap in the literature.

We believe that this teaching note will add to the scholarship on social work education, which currently lacks accounts of first-time experiences teaching a Bachelor's-level social work course, which is distinct in a number of respects from Master's level education. Firstly, Bachelor's level students generally have significantly less practice experience than Master's level students, and therefore a more limited context for understanding the application of theories to practice. Bachelor's level students also generally have less developed academic skills, such as academic writing and the application of critical thinking. Less practice experience and more limited academic skills can have the effect of increasing the anxiety level of students preparing for practice, and can require the dedication of time in lecture to building up these skills and providing more applied examples from one's experience as an instructor, sometimes leaving less time and opportunity for going into greater depth with the subject matter. Different teaching scope creates different teaching challenges, which we believe is reflected in our teaching note. In addition, while most literature on first-time social work teaching was created prior to Covid-19, this teaching note highlights the unique challenges of teaching in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most literature on teaching during Covid-19 is neither about teaching for the first time nor in social work, with some scholarship available in different disciplines, including pharmacy (Karattuthodi et al., 2022), optometry (Jonuscheit et al., 2021), and dentistry (Hiatt, 2021). In addition, while much of the literature on social work teaching during Covid-19 pertains to virtual teaching (Hiatt, 2021; Karattuthodi et al., 2022), the authors' experience was an in-person setting in the context of the ongoing pandemic.

Background

We will share our experience teaching an advanced Bachelor's level practice course in a university in Western Canada. This course is a part of a 2-year Bachelor of Social Work program, which requires 2 years of undergraduate studies prior to the start of the program. The program has two core social work practice courses. One is a foundational course in the first year. The course we taught is a more advanced course in the second year. Following this practice course, students will go on to complete their final practicum the following term, after which they will graduate and enter the field of practice. The course was held over a 13-week period, with a 3-hour class each week. The class size was 54 students. The course took place from September to December 2021, during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and was delivered in person, while following safety precautions.

(Jack) was the adjunct professor, and (Karen) was the teaching assistant. Despite both of us having experience as guest lecturers, this was our first experience with teaching / providing teaching assistance for an entire course. We are both practitioners with a Master of Social Work degree. (Jack) specialises in mental health and substance use, and (Karen) specialises in geriatric social work practice.

Method

During the course, we continuously reflected on our teaching approach. Apart from reflecting individually, we also met regularly to share and discuss our observations, with these discussions lasting from 15 minutes to an hour. We found that there were many insights we gained during this time, which we believe may be helpful for other social work educators teaching for the first time. This was the impetus for creating this teaching note. We took notes on our individual reflections and discussions. When we had contradictory perspectives, we discussed until we came to a consensus.

We received both anecdotal feedback and formal evaluations from the students. The feedback given from both anecdotal and informal evaluation sources largely aligned with formal evaluations allowing for greater opportunity for making generalisations about the student experience. Throughout the process, we consulted and communicated with two specialists on teaching, research, and ethics at the Teaching Centre of our university. Their advice was that we did not need to seek ethics approval, because our purpose for conducting and drawing on formal evaluations was to enhance teaching quality. We do not directly draw on the formal evaluations or any specific examples of feedback in this teaching note. Instead, we only use these evaluations to help elicit our own insights into the teaching experience.

Learnings from a first-time experience teaching social work

The following are the key learnings from our reflections on our experience teaching a social work course for the first time.

1. Acknowledging that instructors and students can all contribute to, and co-create, a collaborative learning community

It was crucial to create a safer space in the classroom for everyone to share and learn from one other, particularly in the context of heightened anxiety and hardship stemming from the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. We did this by co-creating a collaborative learning community with students. A collaborative learning community refers to a pedagogical concept wherein instructors and students establish a learning community together with particular norms arrived at through dialogue (Malavasic, 2019). We adopted this pedagogy because we believe that everyone in the classroom, not just the instructor, should have the opportunity to give input into the teaching process and environment. We invited students to share what values and principles they felt would contribute to the establishment of a safer, more inclusive, and more collaborative learning community at the beginning of the course. The purpose of this exercise was to invite everyone to co-create a safer space for the exploration of challenging themes and concepts, while also learning and reflecting upon how to create a safer space for their future clients. These collaborative learning principles were reviewed each week at the beginning of class, to provide an opportunity for students to change or reflect on these principles, and to address any concerns about non-adherence to what was agreed upon. Some of the challenges we faced in this approach included the fact that only certain students participated in the discussion, and issues of non-adherence were often communicated outside of class individually, rather than during the class review each session. This necessitated the instructor finding a way to address the concerns voiced individually with the class, while not identifying the student sharing the feedback. Student feedback reflected an appreciation for this approach, especially considering the unique pressures of learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Responding to anxieties, challenges, and mistakes

Teaching a social work course for the first time was an anxiety-inducing experience. We found it helpful to remind ourselves that we had a great deal to draw upon from our practice experience, which helped us gain confidence in our teaching. At the same time, we also reminded ourselves that students had a great deal to offer from their life and practice experience as well. We found it helpful to frequently remind ourselves that we were teaching a social work course for the first time, and that many of the experiences and challenges associated with this were new to us. These unique challenges included handling requests for accommodation, managing time, handling attendance/absences, as well as designing, describing and grading assignments for the first time, all of which were impacted significantly by the Covid-19 pandemic. The frequency of requests for accommodation seemed to have increased based on discussion with faculty who had taught in prior years, and absences due to Covid-19 symptoms made monitoring absences and tying these to grades infeasible.

There were aspects of the course which did not go as well as we expected and mistakes were made. However, we reflected on what we could learn from these experiences and aimed to use these experiences to inform our response to similar situations in the future. We reminded ourselves that our goal was not perfection, but rather continued growth in our capacity as educators, and that teaching is meant to be flexible and adaptive to the specific needs of each class. We also strived to model the use of mindful self-compassion (Neff, 2009) to engage with the inevitable experience of making mistakes in practice and the moral distress caused by these situations, as well as offering a way to learn and grow from these mistakes, rather than having our confidence or identity as practitioners undermined by them. We also disclosed to students that this was our first time teaching and providing teaching assistance for a full course. We reflected with the class on the learning curve that we faced in this process, and likened it to the learning curve that students were likewise facing. Despite our best efforts to manage the complex challenges that emerged during the semester, some challenges, in particular the recurring issue of workload, could only be acted upon to a limited degree, leaving some students still feeling overwhelmed and struggling to complete assignments in a timely way. However, from students' feedback, we learned that they appreciated our sharing that this was a new experience for us, and that this was perceived as an invitation to them to embark on a teaching and learning journey together with us.

3. Setting priorities

Given the general and over-arching nature of the course, which spanned the full breadth of social work practice, there was too much content to cover in the limited time available. A significant challenge while designing this course was having a clear idea of what content had been covered in previous courses, and clarifying this required consultation with faculty who had been involved in delivering that content. Time management was also a challenge for us as first-time social work educators. We handled this challenge by setting priorities. For example, we decided what topics needed to be addressed in class and what could be left for students to explore independently, outside of class. We also set an agenda at the beginning of each class to act as scaffolding for the session and to help students to have a clear idea of what topics would be touched on in the class. We set priorities according to our main teaching goal – preparing students to enter the field. This goal will be further discussed later in this article. It was challenging at times to determine which content would best prepare students as they entered practice in the field. Ultimately, we reminded ourselves that it was impossible to cover all the potentially relevant content, and strived to present a framework for ongoing learning, which included setting personal learning goals both at the beginning and the end of the course. We also reflected, both during and after the course, on how we might distill this information in a subsequent teaching of the course in order to better focus on key concepts and provide more space for group and class discussions related to these topics. Admittedly, however, more access to teaching materials used by previous instructors of the course and the preceding courses might have assisted in distilling the content prior to the teaching of the course. Ultimately, the wide breadth of the course also meant that some students felt there was not enough time to delve fully into important topics, while other students felt that there were still important topics missing. The conclusion we drew

from this was that it was impossible to adequately cover the material comprehensively, and that the choices made for including or excluding material should be shared transparently with students.

4. Seeking feedback

We recognised that there was significant room for improvement for us as first-time social work educators, and that the students themselves could provide valuable feedback to us as we developed our skills as educators. As a result, we sought feedback from students about the course in a number of ways. We sought feedback during class, were receptive to informal feedback outside of class, and also conducted both mid-term, and end-of-term evaluations. Throughout the term, we strived to adjust our teaching approach according to the feedback we received. It should be noted however, that some of the feedback was contradictory, which speaks to the fact that it is difficult to generalise about the perspectives and needs of a class of 54.

5. Using teaching support and resources

Making good use of teaching support and resources helped us to navigate the experience of being first-time social work educators. We each had mentors with experience in teaching or providing teaching assistance. We invited our mentors to share their knowledge, give suggestions, and share their perspectives on the questions we posed. We reflected about whether their suggestions could be applied in our context, or whether we needed to adjust them before application. Some of the feedback they gave, including their assessment that this cohort of students was struggling with challenges not seen prior to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, was validating. Other feedback given about the recurring challenges of managing accommodations and feedback regarding assignments and grading, helped normalise our experience as educators. We also used the resources from our department and university. For example, the university has a teaching centre that provides instructional skill workshops and consultations. Technical resources were also utilised, such as support with using audiovisual equipment during lectures and the functions in Canvas (an online teaching platform used to share lecture materials, conduct mid-term evaluations, and grade, among other functions).

6. Encouraging student engagement

According to McGranahan (2008), one potential pitfall for first-time social work educators is focusing more on lecturing than student engagement. We encouraged students' engagement in different ways. The method we used most often in this course was topic-related case studies, which facilitated students' application of material and stimulated critical thinking. Using case studies is a teaching method that has been shown to facilitate students' learning by providing an opportunity for them to apply concepts to situations encountered in practice (Penn et al., 2016). We prepared questions under each case study to guide students' discussion. When we were preparing case studies, we strived to discover the right level of detail to inform, but not restrict, discussion. We strived to reserve time for students to discuss in small groups; however, we also attempted to draw out the most

salient points of small group discussion to share with the full class, so that students could benefit from perspectives outside of their individual groups. Usually, we would have two to three case studies for students to discuss, divide students into groups to discuss different case studies, and reserve 30 to 45 minutes for the whole discussion process. From students' feedback, they found case studies interesting and learned a great deal from the discussion process. We also paid attention to the time to ensure that students had enough time for discussion, though this was often a challenge when there was too much lecture material to cover, and when organic, class-wide discussion emerged during lecture. These organic discussions were often fruitful, allowing students to guide the lecture into areas of interest and sometimes contention, and generally seemed to facilitate greater engagement with the material, though at times these became time-consuming and left less time for other material and small-group discussion. Student participation in discussions was also impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, as all students were required to wear masks throughout the session, which seemed to act as a minor barrier to engagement, and offered practical challenges around issues like being able to hear students' comments, and needing to have comments repeated.

7. Acknowledging diversity

Working with the diversity of a class of 54 was also a learning curve for us as first-time social work educators. We paid attention to different learning styles, disabilities that impact learning, and how the classroom and the course could be made more inclusive and adaptive to the needs of individual students. We did this by utilising different teaching formats, such as lectures, discussions, and case studies. Due to the content-heavy nature of our lectures, however, opportunities for non-lecture-based learning were at times neglected. We also strived to be as flexible as possible when accommodating students with particular needs, though due to the large number of accommodations requested, it became difficult over time to remain aware of students' specific needs. We also strived to use inclusive language, and acknowledged and corrected when we spoke using language that did not align with this ideal, drawing again on the concept of mindful self-compassion, and seeing mistakes as opportunities for learning. Teaching a course with such a broad scope, it was at times challenging to incorporate substantive material regarding how the subjects being studied could be interpreted through different social and cultural lenses, such as the experience of racialised groups and gender and sexual minorities. Upon reflection, it might have been beneficial to make use of different media or guest speakers to offer some of these perspectives from people with lived experience that differed from our own.

8. Facilitating students to think critically

As social work educators, we hoped to facilitate students' critical thinking, a crucial skill for new practitioners entering the field. As first-time educators, we adopted different strategies to help us to engage students' critical thinking. For example, when students discussed case studies on ethical dilemmas, we noticed that students tended to develop solutions quickly, rather than fully appreciating and exploring the nuances of case studies, and the complex ethical and other dynamics at play. We encouraged students to think more deeply about the application of theory to practice, and strived to challenge them to do so by posing questions

that elicited such reflection. When students asked questions, we sometimes refrained from answering the questions directly. Instead, utilising a Socratic approach, we brought up another question to guide them toward a deeper level of analysis. The Socratic approach is a teaching method that facilitates students' thinking by asking them questions that seek to elicit ever greater levels of depth and nuance, which is widely adopted in the education of different disciplines (Nienaber, 2012). One example was asking students to reflect on how their approach to different interventions might be impacted by limited resources and other systemic barriers that are commonly encountered in real-world practice situations, themselves made more challenging by a variety of factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic. We believe that students learned the most from engaging in finding answers themselves, with our support and gentle guidance. Many students demonstrated growth in their ability to apply critical thinking to their assignment submissions during the course of the semester, as well as in their feedback during discussions; however, some still struggled to make this leap. This perhaps was, in part, due to the added pressure that students were under during this semester and many students' difficulty with managing workload, leaving less time to reflect meaningfully on the material being studied.

9. Reflecting on the purpose of assignments and grading

One of the greatest challenges in teaching a course for the first time was to design and grade assignments in such a way as to facilitate the learning of key concepts. One of the most difficult aspects of this was the need to describe assignments in a clear, accessible way, while not being so specific as to restrict the opportunity for creativity and different interpretations. We did not always succeed in doing so, and often had to provide further clarification to assist students with understanding what the assignments asked for. The use of rubrics can assist in providing students with an idea of the characteristics of an assignment at each grade level; however, in our experience, this too can be restrictive if not created thoughtfully and allowing for some flexibility.

Grading is a useful exercise when it provides feedback for continued improvement of knowledge, skills, and competencies. However, in our experience, the opportunity that grading provides for feedback and growth is undermined when the grades that students receive do not align with their expectations, or with the grading practices of other instructors in the program. Finding the balance between providing constructive critical feedback, and not triggering distress, which often shuts down cognitive processes on the part of students and can inhibit the learning process, was an ongoing challenge. In our experience, we came to realise that no grading approach will ever be guaranteed to satisfy the expectations of all students. Being receptive to feedback, without necessarily endorsing all of that feedback did, however, seem to be appreciated by students. Finally, we discovered that grading for a large class is a time-consuming process, and requires good time management, as well as a sense of how detailed your feedback can be while still allowing you to adhere to your grading schedule.

10. Ongoing reflection on the teaching goal

First-time social work educators may lose their teaching direction as they get caught up in the experience (McGranahan, 2008). We found it helpful to frequently remind ourselves of this course's main teaching goal: to prepare students to enter the field as practitioners. We set this teaching goal explicitly at the beginning of the course, when we also reviewed learning objectives, and revisited it throughout the course. We believe that one crucial thing to help students be better prepared to enter the field is to help them understand some of the challenging realities of frontline practice. According to literature, social work graduates find the most challenging part of their transition from students to practitioners is finding out, from their first job after graduation, the discrepancy between what they learned in their program and the reality of practice in the field (Lynn Glassburn, 2020; Richards-Schuster et al., 2016). We tried to help students to be prepared for these realities by sharing our clinical experience honestly, while still remaining constructive. For example, many students shared that they hoped to make macro-level changes. We shared the challenges we have faced in trying to create macro-level changes in the face of limited resources, and institutional barriers that exist within the systems of care that we work in. To remain constructive however, we also spoke about the ways in which, as practitioners, we can act to mitigate the systemic barriers that our clients face, and at times, take the initiative to advocate for smaller-level changes within organisations. The ultimate goal was to appreciate that there will always be a gap between aspirational practice and the limitations of practice in the field, and that this can trigger moral distress, which all practitioners must be mindful of, and proactive in managing, in order to remain resilient as practitioners, while also looking for opportunities to create change within systems.

Conclusion

When reflecting generally on our experience teaching a Bachelor's level social work course for the first time, certain insights emerged as particularly salient. The first is an acknowledgment of the ever-changing nature of being an educator, which is impacted by the nuances of specific cohorts, as well as many events outside of the teaching space, such as the Covid-19 pandemic in our case. This realisation highlights the need for adaptability and an attitude of openness, as well as the importance of approaching the work through the lens of constructive, mindful self-compassion, so that mistakes and setbacks are seen as opportunities for learning and growth, rather than resulting in discouragement. Related to this is the importance of modeling social work values to students in all your actions as an educator, providing a template that each student can subsequently adapt to their practice. Another realisation that emerged as particularly salient is the need to always remain focused on the learning experience of students, which dictates what students will walk away from the course with far more than the specific content covered, or not covered. A safe and constructive learning environment allows for student engagement with the material while creating a positive experience for students and instructors alike.

We hope that our sharing of our experience as first-time social work educators helps to shed light on the challenges social work educators face, and some of the potential ways to address and overcome these challenges early in one's teaching career, and specifically when teaching Bachelor's level students in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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