CHAPTER 17. 'I KNOW, WHAT SOCIAL WORK IS': BRINGING CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT TO A SOCIAL WORK COURSE

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Introduction

Ambiguity in the mission of social workers due to a lack of institutionalization is not only typical for the discipline (Musil 2013), but also creates challenges regarding the way that social work is taught. First year students typically only have a very vague notion of what social work entails at the beginning of their studies, so the challenge is to adequately explain the core principles that define the nature of social work and how it is reflected in practice. Consequently, I have designed an innovation that supports students to gain skills which help them to conceptualise the nature of social work via the writing of essays and other written output. The innovation particularly focused on two kinds of skills: (1) the ability to apply the concepts of social work to actual client cases and (2) to use academic language when describing the handling of those cases.

The core of the innovation consisted of an exercise, a case study followed by a discussion, which took place during the seminar. In order to align the content of the course and the assessment more closely, this exercise was similar to the assignment of one of the essays students had to write to pass the course (Biggs 2003).

The evaluation of the innovation revealed that on the whole students considered the innovation useful because it helped them to get familiar with the nature of social work. When compared to the performance of students in the past, the statistical analysis of the scores that students received on the essay showed no significant improvement. However, the co-teacher of the course, who graded the essays, spoke of a notable improvement in terms of the quality of the essays, especially in terms of understanding what a social worker does.

The innovation

Introduction to Social Work is an obligatory course for freshmen in the Social Work B.A. study program at Masaryk University in Brno. Some students study social work as a single study program, some in combination with public policy, psychology, social anthropology or other disciplines. The course is taught in Czech as the participating students are either Czech or Slovak. There were thirty-one students enrolled in the course when the innovation took place.

The aim of this course is to introduce students to the field of social work, how theoretical concepts of the profession appear in the everyday practice of social workers when handling client cases and what the current condition of the institutionalization of social work is. These aims are

translated into the following learning outcomes as defined in the syllabus: (1) students should be able to interpret clients' living circumstances in terms of the interaction between people, their social environment, and their living situation; (2) to distinguish between questions on the client's living situation and questions on helping intervention, construing his or her own social worker's role in the context of a specific case, and (3) to distinguish between the modern and postmodern institutionalization of social work.

These outcomes were created historically mainly for administrative purposes, yet they well express the idea that students should not only have theoretical knowledge about the social work, but they should also be able to apply it.

The course is taught via both lectures and seminars and relies on individual work by students and feedback by the teacher in order to achieve the learning objectives. The course consists of weekly ninety-minute lectures and fifty-minute seminars.

Students are divided into two seminar groups. An experienced professor delivers the lectures, which mainly consist of frontal teaching, even though students are invited to ask questions and engage in discussions. As a lecturer responsible for the seminars my aim is to motivate students to read the compulsory literature, and to help them to apply and further deepen the theoretical knowledge that was gained from the lectures and the assigned reading materials. Individual student work includes the two structured essays to which my innovation is related and other shorter writing pieces for the seminar.

While completing exercises during and for the seminars is not a problem for the students, essays are considered difficult: students tend to score low on the essays and they often describe these as challenging in the end-of-semester course evaluation. Therefore, I decided to help students with the essays in my innovation. Specifically, I focused on the second essay because the result of the second essay is usually worse than that of the first one.

In the first essay, students are asked to address the question 'What difficulties does your client experience in terms of the mutual interaction with his/her surroundings?' and they are instructed to describe the situation of the client – real or imaginary – and make use of the language that can be found within the professional literature (namely Bartlett and Saunders 1976) on three standard pages. The second essay builds on the first: students have to demonstrate how, as a social worker who is part of a network of various helping professionals, they could contribute to addressing the problems of their client. They have two standard pages to describe the multidisciplinary network of professionals (consisting of at least a social worker and two other helping professionals), to formulate questions about the life situation of the client on behalf of the network participants and discuss how the contribution of social workers compares to those of the other helping professionals. Students receive written feedback on each essay and two lectures are devoted to the discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the essays. Students have the opportunity to revise and resubmit each essay once.

While developing the innovation, I relied on the notion of constructive alignment. Constructive alignment requires that 'the curriculum and its intended outcomes, the teaching methods used, the assessment tasks – are aligned to each other' (Biggs 2003: 1). The proper alignment covers the complete curriculum, including the design and coordination of all courses within the Social Work program. Since I cannot exert influence over these, I focused on aligning the course components: learning outcomes, teaching methods and graded assignments. The aim is to establish an environment where the student 'constructs meaning through relevant learning activities [...] and finds it difficult to escape without learning what he or she is intended to learn' (Biggs 2003: 2). The learning outcomes and assignments of this introductory social work course had been aligned before the innovation, but the methods were out of sync because they did not sufficiently prepare students for coping with the essays. The lectures offered frontal teaching, which supports lower order thinking (Luther 2000), so they help students to obtain knowledge on what social work is, but not to apply it, which is an essential skill to succeed when writing the essays. Seminars, on the other hand, offer active ways of teaching students via group work with case studies or discussions, which stimulates problem solving and knowledge application (Murray and Lang 1997).

Before I introduced this innovation, students were assigned the tasks related to the second essay at several seminar sessions, but no exercise prepared them for the complexity of those tasks that are required in the second essay. For the innovation to be effective, I chose to build upon the constructivist paradigm, which sees learning as an instance of working with students' prior knowledge (Chin and Brown 2000) and intelligibility (Cakir 2008). This represents a challenge to my innovation, because students come to the course with very different skill sets and knowledge from high school. Understanding and using academic language is among these skills and I believe it strongly influences the success of students in the essays. I turned to the method of reflective learning to cope with the above challenges. Reflective learning resonates well with constructivist philosophy (Lai-Chong and Ka-Ming 1995) and can be defined as a cycle of action and reflection which repeats permanently (Ramsey 2006: 5). The goal of reflective learning is to deepen the knowledge that has been obtained (Moon 2004: 85), and repeating the phases of action and reflection which allows students and their teacher to assess their understanding of the task and their usage of academic language.

I innovated two sessions in both of my seminar groups. The main activity took place in the first of these, a week before the second essay was due. Students received the case of a young mother, who is deaf and has a tendency to self-harm, and whose two children are raised by their grandmother. The themes of disability, family, foster care and homelessness were present in the case. Students worked in groups and had to (1) identify different social workers and other helping professionals who can contribute to resolving the case; (2) define who the client/s of the different helping professionals is/are and (3) contemplate how working for the particular client changes

the perspective of the professionals involved. Then they had to choose one of the clients and all the helping professionals suitable for the client and think about the different perspectives of the latter, considering the fields of the particular helping professionals, the focus of interest of these helping professionals when working with the chosen client, and the kind of questions that should be posed to the client. A plenary discussion followed the group work, during which students summarized and compared their findings to obtain a complex view of the case. The discussion was structured in the same way as the group work. I used papers and markers to visualize those clusters of clients and 'their' helping professionals that students came up with during the group work. Both the group work and the discussion included the phases of action and reflection. During the group work, students took action by answering the questions for themselves and sharing their opinions with their peers. Reflection was prompted by the need to present a unified group opinion and thus students within each group justified their proposed approach and considered the pros and cons of each solution. During the plenary discussing action took place when each group described and justified their approach. Subsequently, students were asked to contemplate the merits of their own and the other groups' recommendations. I facilitated this reflection by playing the role of devil's advocate: I highlighted contradictions between group opinions encouraging students to discuss those that they initially overlooked and I also brought up alternative options where possible. I had even refrained from suggesting that either of the approaches was better – rather, I let students debate the options among themselves to come to a solution. I expected this innovation to help students to perform better on the essay both in terms of addressing the problem presented in the case therein and expressing their ideas using professional parlance.

The research design

I evaluated my innovation using several data sources to ascertain the validity and reliability of my results. I have conceptualized the evaluation as described in table 1 below and used the following data.

First, I used essay scores to get information about students' progress. Student essays are categorized as a 0, 10, 20 or 30-points essay. Specifically, I compared student results on the first and second essays in the innovated year with the results from the same course in 2017 and 2016. I used descriptive statistics and the analysis was conducted via variance tests (ANOVA).

Second, I relied on the evaluation of the professor who delivers the lectures of the course and grades the essays. I conducted a semi-structured interview with him starting with the following questions: (1) After reading the essays, what are the strengths of our students this year? (2) What are their weaknesses? When you compare the essays with those from the previous years, can you see any differences? I also asked follow-up questions along the lines of the skills that I deemed essential for students to acquire (see table 1). This approach enabled me to distinguish

the themes that the professor spoke about spontaneously from those from my prompts. I transcribed the data and analysed these using structural coding, where issues B1) a-e and B2) a and b are my structural unites.

Table 1. The Conceptualisation of the evaluation of the innovation

A – overall result as a quantitative criterion	Result measured in points obtained in the second essay	
B – abilities/skills necessary for reaching the high score in essay two as qualitative criterion	1) the ability to distinguish and describe the specific contributions of social workers in addressing the client's problem	a. knowledge of the definition of social work
		b. the ability to understand the lived situation of a particular client and subsequently ask questions about it
		c. the ability to ask questions about clients lived situation, that follow the definition of social worker
		d. the ability to compare questions of different professionals
		e. the ability to see differences in questions formulated by the social worker and the other professionals to describe the particular contribution of a social worker
	2) the ability to use specific academic language while describing a social worker's contribution	a. understanding of the terminology
		b. the ability to express ideas comprehensively

Third, I was interested in the students' perceptions. I used semi-structured discussions for getting feedback from students at the last seminar of each seminar group. Students were asked to complete sentences such as: 'The seminars taught me...' or 'I think what I've learned here has been/would be/will be useful'. I got students' agreement to record the lesson and analyse the recordings for academic purposes. I transcribed the data and analysed these using again structural coding relying on the same structural units as described above.

Results

The statistical analyses do not provide evidence that the innovation helped improve student performance on the second paper. Average student scores for the first draft of the essay were seven points higher in 2018 than 2017 but only with 0.217 higher than in 2016 (table 2). The result of the analysis of variance shows that differences are significant and most likely this result is driven by the comparison between 2018 and 2017. This increase may be due to the innovation but it is equally likely that in 2017 a relatively high number of students did not submit the first draft and received a '0' score[1]. The latter is a very likely possibility since point scores were very close in both 2018 and 2016 (table 2).

Table 2. Comparing mean student performances on the first and second versions of the second essay in the treatment group of 2018 and the control groups of 2017 and 2016.

	Treatment Group (2018)			Control Groups				Difference of Means	df	F-value
	N	Mean	SD	Year	N	Mean	SD			
First draft	30	12.00	6.644	2016	28	11.79	7.724	0.214	2, 77	7.611 **
				2017	22	5.00	6.726	7.000		
Second draft	30	21.00	6.618	2016	28	18.93	8.751	2.071	2, 77	2.169
				2017	22	16.36	8.477	4.636		

Test: ANOVA

* p≤.05; ** p≤.01 *** p≤.005

The result for the second draft of the essay shows an increase in the average point score compared to both 2016 and 2017 (2.071 and 4.636, respectively) but the differences are not statistically significant, suggesting again, that the innovation did not have the desired impact. The only undisputable outcome is that in 2018 no student scored zero points.

Contrary to this, the professor who graded the essays, noticed a difference compared to the previous years, specifically in relation to the second draft: 'I had hesitated, whether I should give them [students] 10 or 20 [points] previously, now I hesitated whether I should give them 20 or 30', he noted. There are a few potential explanations why this qualitative difference was not detectable during the quantitative analysis. It may be that this year the professor unconsciously raised the bar and was harsher than in the previous years. This is possible, because the assess-

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1 I do not have the data to distinguish between how many students received 0 points because they wrote a low quality essay and how many because they did not submit their essay.

ment criteria for the essays are not defined explicitly. It may also be that the innovation helped students with some components of the essay but not with others; so that the overall results did not change. Finally, the point scale is not sensitive to subtle changes as it only has four values (0, 10, 20 or 30), therefore a qualitative change from 10 to 15 would most likely still receive a score of 10.

Some students also expressed that they believed that the case studies they participated in during the seminar 'helped to develop the skill of writing essays'. Specifically, they noted that the exercises helped them in identifying the exact contribution of the social worker in addressing a client's problems. Students connected this issue with an understanding of the requirements of the profession: 'I know, what social work is and what I do [as a social worker]' and related it to the relevant theoretical concepts, e.g. 'I remember mainly Bartlett', referring to Bartlett and Saunders (1976). One student described that she learned to work with expectations of different subjects, which is again an application of the approach expressed in the textbook.

Some students mentioned the relationship between social workers and other helping professionals, e.g. 'I can imagine what a multi-professional web is', while a few students connected the ability to apply the concepts from the discipline to a particular case with the notion of 'how to do social work'. This is especially notable because we did not discuss the methods of social work in the seminars. Students demonstrated the ability of how to approach a client (the ability to ask questions about clients' lived situation) and the skills necessary for case analysis (i.e. abilities to distinguish the question about a client's lived situation and intervention and to use the perspective of expectation). Indeed, the professor confirmed that students 'have correct ideas about questions about clients' lived situation, but it is difficult for them to formulate these autonomously'.

Using an academic language encapsulates the ability to understand that language and express ideas comprehensively through it. Rather than explicitly talking about academic language, students sensed an issue with language: 'The assignment [of essays] seemed to be clear, but then my results [on the essays] weren't as good as I expected' or 'it was difficult for me to understand the assignments we did at the seminars'. For me, these comments signal a lack of understanding surrounding the academic use of language which corresponds to a lack of ability to use language academically, as the professor also noted: 'They [students] are not used to express themselves in this specific genre'.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the outcomes of a teaching innovation that addressed students' difficulty in analysing social work cases. While quantitative data failed to reflect any significant improvement, qualitative data from both the students and the professor documented an improvement in terms of the contents of the essays, but not in the use of academic language. All in all, the

findings suggest that I should use a similar activity to prepare students for the first essay as well. In the future, I would like to improve both the innovation and the analysis of its impact. First, since it is clear that students struggle with understanding and using academic language, in the future more attention should be paid to helping them to decipher this language in the description of cases and the instructions for the exercises and to explaining that the professional language used in the exercise should also be used in the essays. Second, better measurement instruments could help to have a fuller and clearer picture of the impact of the innovation regarding both language and content. For example, students did not always pay attention to the open-ended questions during the semi-structured discussions, therefore using a feedback questionnaire could be useful as well as direct questions concerning the innovation. Finally, I would recommend a less rigid grading scale and a more transparent grading rubric – possibly along the lines of table 1 above – to discern nuances in student progress.

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