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Teaching and Learning of Social Work through Autobiographic Literatures

Komalsingh Rambaree and Lis-Bodil Karlsson
Teaching and Learning of Social Work through Autobiographic Literatures

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Abstract: Like many other subjects and disciplines, the teaching and learning of social work is also based on the notion of engaging learners through different levels of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of learning - cognitive, affective and psycho-motor. From this theoretical perspective, teachers responsible for developing social work curricula usually look for different materials and methods for transferring social work knowledge and skills that touch the three essential domains of teaching and learning. Within this context, this paper considers the use of autobiographic literatures as a material and method for transferring social work knowledge and skills to learners through the three learning domains. Through a discourse analysis of students’ perceptions on making use of autobiographic literatures in a research methodology course, this paper answers two specific research questions: (a.) how social work learners relate to autobiographic literatures as a learning material and (b.) how autobiographic literatures could effectively be used within teaching and learning of social work. The analysis of the learners’ perspective from this study reveals that autobiographic literatures are interesting, informative and helpful materials for teaching and learning of both theories and practice of social work. However, teachers responsible for designing social work teaching curricula should ensure that methodologically the materials and methods engage the learners at different learning domains for the learning of both theories and practice of social work. The paper also supports the view that materials and methods in teaching and learning of social work should be rigorously evaluated with more focus given to the learners’ insights as part of a more participatory curriculum review.

Keywords: Bloom’s Taxonomy, Autobiographic Literatures, Social Work, Participatory Curriculum Review

Introduction

THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) consider social work as a practical profession that promotes “social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being” (as quoted in Horner 2006: 2). Social work learners are therefore required to demonstrate practical application of skills and knowledge related to both theory and practice of social work. In this connection, social work educators face the enormous challenge of preparing learners to tackle the complex realities of professional social work practice (Petrovich, 2004). In designing social work teaching curricula, it is therefore essential for social work educators to have a variety of tools, techniques, methodologies and materials that engage the learners with both theories and practice of social work.

Like many other subjects and disciplines, the teaching and learning of social work is based on the notion of involving learners through different level of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of
learning - cognitive, affective and psychomotor. From this perspective, academics responsible for developing social work curricula usually look for different ways and means for transferring social work knowledge and skills that would touch these three essential learning domains.

Within this context, this paper considers the use of autobiographic literature as a methodological exemplar of transferring social work knowledge and skills to learners. The aim of this paper is to analyse learners’ perceptions on making use of autobiographic literature in a research methodology course. This paper therefore answers two specific research questions: (a.) how do social work learners relate to autobiographic literature as a learning methodology? (b.) how could autobiographic literature be effectively used as a learning methodology in social work?

The following section of this paper describes the contextual, conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the research. Then, it explains the methodology that has been used in carrying out this study. Following the methodology section, the article presents the results and considers some implications for the teaching and learning of social work. Finally, the paper ends with some conclusions based on the findings.

**Context of the Research**

Within social work education, theory and practice form essential part of the training curriculum in preparing learners to face the realities of social work. For long social work educators have been debating about the integration of theory and practice within the teaching and training curricula (Barbour, 1984, Watson, Burrows & Player, 2002, Freedberg, 2008). However, the general agreement among social work educators is that theory and practice is linked; and theories are made and challenged from facts based on the instances, contexts and circumstances. As Chan and Chan (2004: 546) put it:

“Theory and practice influence each other. Changes in practice precipitate a need to re-conceptualize theory. Practice is influenced by contextual factors such as agency policy and clientele”.

After evaluating the social work programmes at 16 different Swedish universities, the Swedish National Agency of Higher Education (2009) stresses that the quality of the pedagogy of the teachers needs to develop, since future social workers are expected to understand complex social problems, and, recommended that social work education on scientific method and theory need to be performed on a high quality level (op.cit.).

This is therefore the particular context that provokes the use of autobiographic literature as a methodology for integrating theory and practice within the teaching and learning of International Social Work degree programme at the University of Gävle in Sweden. The International Social Work degree is a 3 ½ years of study programme where students mainly come from China, Russia, India, and Sweden. The pilot use of the autobiographic literature was made in the teaching of social work research methodology course during the academic year 2009-2010; and this is used as the basis for this paper.

**Theoretical Framework**

In its simplest form autobiographic literature consists of narratives of oneself about oneself. In psychology, it has been widely acknowledged that behaviour and emotion are essentially
grounded by autobiographic knowledge (Ho & Watson, 2006). According to Summer and his colleagues (1998) autobiographic texts represent sources of relevant data for cognitive and behavioural analysis. Within the analysis of autobiographic literature, one essential aspect of one or first person narratives is the possibility of getting to know the feelings of personal experiences from an insider point of view. For example the father of Psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1911/1991) made an analysis of one of the most famous patients of his time, Daniel Paul Schreber (1955/2000). Freud though never met Schreber personally, but wrote about Schreber’s state of mind after reading his autobiographic text. Another example is the psychiatrist Edward Podvoll (1990) who also examined autobiographic texts in “Seduction of madness: Revolutionary insights into the world of psychosis and a compassionate approach to recovery at home,” in order to explore the psychotic world of the French artist Henri Michaux and the long distance sailor Donald Crowhurst, among others. The writing of the psychoanalysis-Marguerite Sechehaye (1970), based on the diary written by a young girl diagnosed with schizophrenia, is yet another example of autobiographic literature. One of the recent uses of autobiographic literature is the analysis of personal written accounts of a schizophrenic man undertaken by Lis Bodil Karlsson (2009).

Within the field of psychotherapy or classes in psychopathology, autobiographic literature is therefore not alien. The psychologist Robert Sommer and his colleagues have stressed the importance of working with literature for future professionals during psychotherapy and for the sake of clients/patients themselves (Sommer et al. 1998). For example the work of Schreber (1995/2000) seems so be specifically useful in training future psychotherapists. Within social work practice, the autobiographic literatures have had a remarkable impact on the field; for example, in the work of the Alcohol Anonymous (Sommer et al. 2003) and in interventions within the area of mental illness (Deegan 1993). Sommer and his colleagues (2003) also explain that working with autobiographic literature in teaching psychopathology is a complement to traditional text books and gives a vivid picture of mental suffering. In addition, the use of autobiographic literature enriches the lectures.

From this perspective, it is argued that autobiographic literatures provide rich and comprehensive knowledge for having a better understanding of human behaviour and personal experiences and emotions of future social work clients. Autobiographic literatures can therefore be considered among the essential materials that could be used for transferring social work knowledge and skills to learners. For a more structured way of teaching and learning of social work through autobiographic literatures, it is essential that the curriculum is framed using learning taxonomies.

Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of learning, which has been revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), is perhaps one of the most widely used theoretical perspective in designing and structuring teaching and learning. Bloom’s (1956) identified three levels of learning—cognitive, affective and psychomotor. The cognitive domain involves knowledge and the development of intellectual skills. The affective domain addresses interests, opinions, emotions, attitudes, and values (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The psychomotor domain is based on the fact that neither conscious knowledge nor values and attitudes are sufficient to explain effective performance of learned tasks (Rovai et al, 2009). Within the psychomotor domain learning takes place through practice. This study is therefore framed within the Bloom’s taxonomy of learning domain and analyses how learning using autobiographic literature methodology takes place.
Methodology

Data for this study was collected during the fall of 2009, through semi-structured interviews of students, who were in their second year of study in the International Social Work programme at the University of Gävle, Sweden. The students were of an average age of 22 years old, from various countries such as Sweden, Indian, Russia and China. In the sample, there were two male research participants. In total 21 students (out of 32) completed the tasks and they are considered as the research participants of this particular study.

As one of the individual tasks during a course in scientific methods during the third semester, the students got the opportunity to analyze an autobiographic text written by someone suffering from severe mental problems and/or having troubles with the use of alcohol and/or drugs. The research participants were able to choose one of the following texts:

1. *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1899/1973) is a classic story about the nervous brake down of a woman and illustrates from an inside point of view the reflections of being tormented by depression and delusion.
2. Alice Jamieson (2009) describes in *Today I’m Alice. A Memoir of Multiple Personality Disorder*, the situation of a young voice hearing woman suffering from eating disorders and her recovery process after having been diagnosed with multiple personality disorder.
3. *Go ask Alice* is a more or less factious diary by an anonymous writer that describes a teenage girl becoming dependent on drugs and how she ultimately loses her life (Anonymous, 1971).
4. The book of James Frey *A million little pieces* from 2003 has created an intensively debate whether he depicted a true story or not. The truth though is that his story about drug and alcohol abuse and the rehabilitation has been a best seller.

The individual task given to the students were framed within the following learning domains, as shown in table 1.

**Table 1: Individual Task with Learning Domains**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Domain</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Recalling Knowledge: Recall data or information</td>
<td>Write a short summary of the text you have read, make a personal presentation of the subject–answering the question: Who is this person?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Valuing: Appreciation of valuing ethical considerations</td>
<td>Explain and discuss how author made any ethical considerations when s/he disclosed her/his life, for example concerning friends, families, professionals and other fellow patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychomotor</td>
<td>Applying and Practicing: Analysis of text</td>
<td>Analyze the autobiographic text. You can chose to make a phenomenological, a hermeneutical or a narrative analysis or a combination.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the completion of the individual task, the research participants were asked to fill in a special evaluation form, in order to get an understanding of the pedagogical value of this specific exercise. Through a discourse analysis of students’ perceptions on making use of autobiographic literatures in a research methodology course, this paper therefore answers two specific research questions: (a.) how do social work learners relate to autobiographic literatures as a learning material and (b.) how could autobiographic literature be effectively used as a learning methodology in social work?

Discourse analysis is concerned with the ways in which meaning is reproduced and transformed in texts (Banister et al., 1994). Through discourse analysis researchers examine the texts from the respondents in which ways knowledge and meanings are constructed (Gee & Green, 1998). For this study, discourse analysis was used as a systematic technique to find out understanding, meanings, motivations, and ideologies hidden behind texts written by the students on autobiographic literatures. In order to organise the analysis, Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of learning which has been revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) has been utilised as a theoretical framework.

English is not the mother tongue of the research participants and their quotes have therefore been slightly corrected in this paper, in order to keep the authenticity. Several ethical considerations were given to this research. First of all, informed consent was obtained from the research participants. The students were not forced to participate in the individual tasks and they were given other alternatives. In addition, research participants’ responses have been anonymised in the reporting of the findings. Finally, social work research ethical principles, such as fairness and justice, no harm etc have also been carefully followed during the research.

**Findings Concerning Learning Domain**

**Cognitive Domain**

Some research participants described that, for the first time during their studies they have realized the complication within the process of comprehending another person’s inner world. In particular, during the autobiographic literatures analysis there are several aspects that one has to take into consideration; for instance, which theoretical perspective is appropriate to use, and if one could use a combination of various theoretical perspectives in looking at the person within the situation and the social problems within the person’s immediate environment. Different theoretical perspectives provide distinct avenues for understanding and constructing meanings from the cases. Thus, reading at the autobiographic literatures allows learners to analyse the suitability of theory/theories in social work.

In relation to the cognitive domain, various yet coherent responses were gathered from the research participants. For instance, as one research participant stated: “It gave me an opportunity to look at a client out of the perspective of a research in social work.”; “I have learned some of the differences between the phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches, but it is hard to understand them....Also that you can interpret a text differently, by using a certain approach”. Another research participant wrote: “It is the first time dealing with a case like this. So it was interesting to do that. I have learned to use different kinds of methods, test my skills. Dare to use some new things I have not done before.” Still another participant stressed that she had the opportunity to “try to think deeper than what the author wrote.” Some other participants reported that, “it’s not always easy to analyze if you don’t know
what to look for, the text is not always what it seems.” One also mentioned: ‘The biggest thing I learned is to let my mind work on its own. Not only read and learn but also give my own thoughts to the understanding of the case.”

On a cognitive level the research participants have therefore realised how complicated was the task of comprehending another person’s inner world by making use of theories. Depending on a chosen perspective one can interpret a personal story differently and then get additional knowledge that could be discussed and compared with others. For example a hermeneutical stand differs from a phenomenological or a narrative one. Dissimilar perspectives does not necessary has to compete with each other about an ultimate truth, but can indeed be complementary. Some discovered that every social worker will probably choose their own perspectives of understanding or interpreting social problems. One of the research participants reported that it was relatively easy to comprehend certain practical ignorance and incompetence of social workers, from the analysis of the autobiographic literature. In all, the task requires creativity of the learners in grounding the findings theoretically.

Affective Domain

During this task, the students were also able to reflect on their personal development in relation to their role as future professional social worker by developing feeling of empathy and compassion with regards to the literature. The task helped the learners towards a greater understanding of the necessity of being open to the story of a social work client. It provided the learners the opportunity to realise that one has to consider social work clients as individual human beings, and not as only belonging to a specific group of people. The consideration of ethical issues in the analysis of literature seems to have been one of the most powerful aspects of the task, like one of the research participants pointed out; “I can see the value and the meaning of the ethical considerations, how it can hurt me and the people I usually don’t ‘think’ ethically about.” As a future social worker one has to be conscious of how to relate to the clients in a correct way and also the ways of making ethical decisions/choices. In this sense, some learners were definitely challenged by the reflection on their future role as social workers, as one of the research participants stated; “there are so many people suffering from all kinds of problems. I am studying hard and learn more to help them!” Another one wrote; “After reading the text, I understand more about the people who are suffering mental health problems, I want to work with these people later.” A third research participant stressed on the importance of “showing empathy and respect to the people one meet on the field.”

The comments of the research participants also concerned the joy of comprehending the feelings of the author, understanding the disclosure of the inner thoughts of the person and getting insights into the life situation of someone coping with social problems. In this connection, one of the gathered quotations read: “I still remember the first time I finished reading the whole text; I was so scared and shocked. After analysing it I realized how much is waiting us in the future! That made me really excited!” But the text could also make one become aware of one’s inner world, as one research participant concluded: “Least enjoyable moment is that after reading it, I was scared of my own wallpaper! [i.e. inner world]”.

On an affective level the task actually gave the students knowledge of how life is when being a drug addict and/or mentally ill. The research participants also understood the need of being emotionally involved in an empathetic way. Thus, the focus on the client’s concerns guided the research participants towards reflecting on how to develop rapport with clients.
in social work. Before doing anything at all for the suffering person, one should first listen, understand and show empathy; especially since every person has specific personality traits, which are of prime importance for consideration in social work interventions. In addition, ethical values always have to be considered during working with clients. In this connection, one of the research participants stated: “I can see the value and the meaning of the ethical considerations, how it can hurt me and the people I don’t ‘think’ ethical about”. During this task the learners were able to reflect on their personal development in relation to their future professional role, as feeling empathy and compassion.

**Psychomotor Domain**

The narratives within the literature actually provided the students knowledge about what it means to experience mental disease and/or abuse of alcohol and drugs out of a subjective perspective. It also gave an insight into the psychological processes of how trauma and social problems can reinforce each other in a negative direction, since professionals and other people can misunderstand or misinterpret. All in all, this task provided a useful learning tool in training future social workers. As a professional social worker, one should try to understand the clients out of their own perspectives and thus apply theoretical knowledge and understanding in supporting and helping the social work clients/service users with such similar issues/problems identified in the literatures. For instance, consider these reflections made by one research participants:

“... working with this assignment and working with my own conclusions and letting my mind work freely. At the same time finding that you have so many ways of analyze. Talking to people and everyone has their own conclusions is really amazing for me ... I learned that one text can give so much information if you just look between the lines./.../ I will take what I learned with me not only in further research but also when I’m working at my job. This has helped me to really listen to what people are saying”.

Another research participant thought that narrative analysis above all helped her in becoming “more sensitive to realities hidden behind human beings in society.” Helping people solving their problems requires understanding of social problems. In this sense, one of the participating learners reported that social workers “have to go back to the origins of their [client’s] experiences or stories, from which we can find out some reasons that could imply those problems”. One of the participants of the study stressed on the following:

“During the analysis I have got the opportunity to meet a client for the first time and I learned the tools to analyze. I think that using all we have read in the books is a good way to show our self if we understood what the books are saying. What we learn during the analysis are things I will use in my future as a social worker. I learned to pay attention to what the client is not saying and how important the context is in an analysis. But it was hard work because it was my first time and it’s not sure that I did it in a good way, but I learned much during the process so for me is the most important part. I learned things that I can clearly see I will use in my future as a social worker”. 
Further some participants expressed that it was not always easy to make a connection to the course literature. Some other participant noticed that they got troubled, even though they experienced the task as appropriate. They suffered by insecurity, whether they analysed the text in “the right way” and if they actually chose the appropriate perspective of their analysis.

Reading the autobiographic text the students confirmed that the task actually challenged them. One research participants wrote: “I found this autobiography provided me with understanding and compelling insight into the consequences of distressing trauma and abuse.” Another participant mentioned: “there are no standard methods to a problem and we don’t need to stick to just one way. It also encourages social workers that even if we are failed in one way, we can always find different paths and achieve our goal.”

On the level of psychomotor the students appreciated the knowledge they acquire just by being open to a story of another human being. The research participants reflected in relation to their future role as social workers, understanding the importance of studying hard and having a goal for their profession, but also that they themselves can make a difference being a professional. During the process one also understood how the future career will involve being engaged in the stories of clients. The research participants seemed to consider the working process as more complicated than anticipated, like comprehending another person’s world.

Discussion

Using Bloom’s taxonomy of learning it becomes clear that the responses from the research participants have consequences for teaching and learning of social work. It is evident that this task of analysing autobiographic literature, which at a first glance could be considered as superficial and easy, actually challenges the learners in various ways within various learning domains. On a cognitive level the students realized how complicated the task is of comprehending another person’s inner world and holding ethical considerations. Some discovered that every social worker will probably choose their own angle of understanding or interpreting social problems. In addition one was confronted, and that was an uncomfortable discovery, of one’s theoretical and practical ignorance and incompetence. It is not either easy to connect what one experiences and conceives to a theoretic standpoint. In all, the task released creativity.

During the process one could also become scared of ones own inner dark world. This is of course a way how people develop their personal empathy and compassion, i.e. when one understands the inner world of one self it gives temporary entrance to another persons as well. Some participants realized how they themselves got emotionally involved and fascinated by the story told. When trying to find a solution for this task one could experience a certain joy, specifically when trying to understand the feelings of the author studied, while using different theories. This is an intersection between all the aspects of the pedagogical analysis done, i.e. emotional, theoretical and psychomotoric aspects, and could above all be considered as an effectively used learning methodology.

In order to become a graduate social worker the learner should, according to the Swedish law, have an empathic attitude, show knowledge of oneself and being able to identify acquirements of new knowledge (Swedish National Agency of Higher Education, 2009). This study shows that the learners actually focus on empathy while realizing that one did not yet have all the required knowledge in order to understand another person’s life, i.e. to interpret an
autobiographic document. This realization inspired towards more learning. But before finding such an attitude, one was actually confronted with one’s own incompetence of not realizing how to get started and how to work through the procedure of understanding and analyzing what and how individuals feel and react.

The use of the autobiographic literature is therefore definitely recommended as material and method that need to be incorporated in the teaching and learning of social work. A successful use of autobiographic literature requires a good design that could engage learners at all the three levels of Bloom’s learning domains. As it can be found from the gathered evidence from the research participants, the use of autobiographic literature within the teaching of social can help learners to reflect both on theories and the practice of social work. However, the success should be evaluated rigorously with the active participation of the learners. In this sense, it is important that learners are given opportunities to reflect on the materials and tools that are used in their education/training.

Conclusion

Although autobiographic literatures have been found to be very useful in the field of psychiatry; working systematically with such a material for the teaching and learning of social work is not very common. However, autobiographic literatures as teaching and learning material for social work seem to be full of potential for engaging learners at the three levels of Bloom’s (1956) learning domains. The analysis of the learners’ perspective from this study reveals that autobiographic literatures are interesting, informative and helpful materials for teaching and learning of both theories and practice of social work. The researchers herewith conclude that their students experienced psychopathology as something understandable that happen to ordinary human beings. Above all, reading biographies helps the students to develop empathy towards the author of the text. However, teachers responsible for designing social work teaching curricula should ensure that methodologically the materials and methods engage the learners at different learning domains for the learning of both theories and practice of social work. The paper also supports the view that materials and methods in teaching and learning of social work should be rigorously evaluated with more focus given to the learners’ insights as part of a more participatory curriculum review.

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Brian Street, University of London, London, UK.
Giorgos Tsiakalos, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece.
Salim Vally, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
Gella Varnava-Skoua, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.
Cecile Walden, Sam Sharpe Teachers College, Montego Bay, Jamaica.
Nicola Yelland, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.
Wang Yingjie, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China.
Zhou Zuoyu, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China.

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The Learner Community
This knowledge community is brought together by a common concern for learning and an interest to explore new educational possibilities. The community interacts through an innovative, annual face-to-face conference, as well as year-round virtual relationships in a weblog, peer reviewed journal and book imprint – exploring the affordances of the new digital media. Members of this knowledge community include academics, teachers, administrators, policy makers and other education practitioners.

Conference
Members of the Learner Community meet at The International Conference on Learning, held annually in different locations around the world, each selected for the particular role education is playing in social, cultural and economic change.

In recent years, the Conference has been held with Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia in 1999; RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia in 2000; the University of Athens, Spetses, Greece in 2001; Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China in 2002; Institute of Education, London University, London, UK in 2003; Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, Havana, Cuba in 2004; University of Granada, Granada, Spain in 2005; Sam Sharpe Teachers College, Montego Bay, Jamaica in 2006; University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa in 2007; the University of Illinois, Chicago, USA in 2008; the University of Barcelona, Spain in 2009; and the Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong in 2010. In 2011, the Conference will be held at the Mauritius.

Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. Intellectually, our interests span the breath of the field of education. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging scholars and teachers. Those unable to attend the Conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can either or both submit a video or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

Online presentations can be viewed on YouTube.

Publishing
The Learner Community enables members to publish through three mediums.

First, by participating in the Learning Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike the traditional academic publishing forums – a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. The International Journal of Learning provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through the book imprint The Learner, publishing cutting edge books on education in print and electronic formats. Publication proposals and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our news blog, constantly publishing short news updates from the Learner Community, as well as major developments in the field of education. You can also join this conversation at Facebook and Twitter or subscribe to our email Newsletter.
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