The Teaching and Learning of Evidence-based Clinical Intervention

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Preamble

The demand for accountability and evidence-based practice in the past decade has called for growing interest in the teaching and learning of process-outcome links in social work education. As social work educators, we have been making great efforts to teach students important concepts and theories related to practice, and to help them integrate these theories into effective and efficient interventions. It is envisaged that student learning can take place with the students as a member of the collaborating team in the teaching and learning process. This project therefore aimed at promoting collaborative learning of clinical interventions with social work students, faculty members as well as practitioners in social services agencies.

Abstract

In collaboration with users, colleagues, students and local practitioners interested in this project, 12 individuals and families participated in consultations with a therapist and a reflecting team of one to four members. Altogether over 70 interviews were conducted with audio- and/or video-tapes transcribed verbatim.

Relevant cases, transcripts and interview sessions had been selected and shown to local practitioners as well as students of the Social Work programme taking different courses. The courses included Theories & Practice in Social Work (Individual Work), Social Work with Families, and other master courses. Students found this practice-based learning very helpful and the Department recruited a group of local practitioners for the development of indigenous skills-based intervention.

Keywords

Evidence-based clinical intervention

Introduction

The demand for accountability and evidence-based practice in the past decade has called for growing interest in the teaching and learning of process-outcome links in social work education. As social work educators, we have been making great efforts to teach students important concepts and theories related to practice, and to help them integrate these theories into effective and efficient interventions. The complexities of individual and family interventions are such that there are several dimensions in a continuous state of flux; for example, the content of interventions, the value-base of practitioners, the outcomes of practice, the perspectives of all the people involved, and the contexts of practice. The project therefore aimed at promoting collaborative learning of clinical interventions with social work students, faculty members as well as practitioners in social services agencies.

Aims and Objectives

1. To enhance good practice of teaching and learning;
2. To promote the teaching and learning of evidence-based social work practice; and
3. To enhance the teaching and learning of clinical social work intervention.

Methodology

This project aimed to promote and support the teaching and practice of evidence-based clinical work. It promoted the uptake of evidence with practice through education and implementation of clinical activities in a supportive environment. The single-system or single-case design (McLeod, 2000, 2003), believed to be a useful tool to evaluate how intervention processes and selected treatment modalities affect specific user systems, was adopted.

Recruitment

Individuals and families were recruited mainly through referral from individuals or social services agencies. Once a referral was received and if the user consented, the Principal Investigator then recruited colleagues, practitioners and sometimes students to be members of the reflecting team. Most of the interviews took place in the Skills Laboratory of the Department of Social Work.

Procedures

With the users' consent, the interviews were audio- and/or video-taped, and the contents were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read through to see how and where the skills and intervention might be effective. The users were involved to express their views on the parts in the process of interviews that they found meaningful. They were also asked if the interviews were useful or not in dealing with the problems that were affecting them, and how they were able to manage the problems or to find satisfaction in life.

After the interviews, colleagues, students and practitioners formed a reflecting team to reflect on what they had learnt from

the users. In some occasions, the users also participated in the reflection team, and the whole group worked in partnership in sharing views, feelings and reflections about the interview.

Analysis

The transcripts were read through to develop themes and sub-themes of relevance to the users' conversations.

Results/Findings

Of the 12 individuals and families, and over 70 interview sessions, around 60 audio- and video-tapes were available for process and content analysis. The interview transcripts were useful in showing and demonstrating how the user-worker relationship was built, how various concepts and skills were used to engage the users, and how different treatment models such as systemic family therapy and narrative therapy were selected for the therapies. Feedback from some users was also solicited for effective practice in future.

Some of the interview tapes and transcripts were selected for teaching and training purposes. Some cases were also used in two skills-based social work courses, *Theories and Practice in Social Work, and Social Work with Families,* and postgraduate programmes such as the Master of Social Sciences in Youth Counselling. Students then involved in role plays and they rehearsed the questions or skills learned. Very often, it was not the skills per se, but the attitudes that were important in good practice. The students found this very helpful in the learning of theories and skills in working with individuals and families.

In fact, several graduates who had participated in the reflecting team actively joined seminars on skills training expressed that the opportunities to participate in the team and the discussion after the interviews did help them learn the true meaning of "practice" and enhanced their motivation to acquire more knowledge and skills and reflect on their intervention.

The tapes and transcripts were also used in the training of social workers and practitioners in the helping fields and different professional disciplines.

Discussion

1. Enhancement of Good Practice of Teaching and Learning

With the rising demand for accountability and evidence of student learning, the ultimate purpose of teaching is to produce student learning. Apart from early efforts to improve the lecturers' classroom instruction, and to develop our teaching skills, there arose the notions of non-threatening, learner-centered education (Braxton, Olson & Simmons, 1998; Lazerson, Wagener & Shumanis, 2000). It is through this collaborative process which students can learn and are empowered.

With respect to teaching and learning of theory integration into practice, according to Jacoby & Associates

(1996) and our experience, service-learning and group-based learning are particularly effective. Among the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1991), the encouragement of student-faculty contact, the encouragement of cooperation among students, the encouragement of active learning, and the provision of prompt feedback are four principles we want to enact in the teaching and learning of theory integration into practice.

When conducting the project, the students were invited to the interview sessions and to participate as members of the professional reflecting team. There were discussions before, during and after the sessions between students and faculty members about the knowledge, skills and attitudes in practice. In particular, attitudes remain an important element in counselling and social work practice. Much effort was put on this area in the discussions through which collaborative learning between students and faculty members was possible.

2. *Teaching and Learning of Evidence-based Social Work Practice*

Society is in the process of recognising both the importance of human resources and of providing human services in an efficient manner. The growing interest in evidence-based social work practice is the result of the call for accountability. Emerging from the medical field, evidence-based practice (EBP) is a process of "life-long, self-directed learning" in which caring for our users creates the need for clinically important information about assessment, treatment goals and therapy (Geddes, 2000; Lipman, 2000; Parry, 2000; Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg & Haynes, 1997).

For instance, EBP research (Basham, 2000; Corcoran, 2000) has indicated that caseworkers with adequate training and supervision in behaviour parent training procedures and family therapy concepts contribute to therapeutic contacts and positive family changes. Hence, EBP is not simply about evaluating and implementing the findings of research. It is essentially an educational process which takes as its starting point the problems/needs brought to therapy by our users. It also transforms continuing professional education into the daily clinical routine. In the process of learning to produce evidence from their practice, our year-two and year-three students worked in partnership with the teaching staff and front-line practitioners in the field. This was made possible in the reflecting process in which students, faculty members as well as other helping professionals, and in many occasions the users joined together as a team to reflect on the process. Instead of the caseworker, counselor, or the interviewer who

assessed and determined the outcome of intervention, the team that included the users and other team members serving as witnesses (Carey & Russell, 2004; White, 2000) shared after the interview what the process was for the users, what worked for them and what they found most helpful in tackling with the problems that were affecting them.

3. Teaching and Learning of Clinical Intervention

Almost in all practice situations in which human service practitioners are involved, they are supposed to understand the user system and the situational context, and the current condition/problem/need, to make assessment by accessing, distilling and thinking about relevant theoretical knowledge that may be adopted; to decide on the practice goals and the practice behaviours and strategies; and, finally, to examine the effect of intervention effort. Social work students, therefore, need to access, order and collect information so that they can make assessments which produce practice responses capable of being evaluated or monitered. A central ingredient in the training of social workers is to enable them to make informed decisions within their own practices. These decisions, and the subsequent practice behaviours, are precisely the things that they need to justify and that other professionals want to study and assess. Figure 1 shows

the four-step cycle of the teaching and learning process that was proposed and tried out in the project.

Figure 1
A Four-step Cycle of Teaching and Learning Evidence-based Clinical Intervention
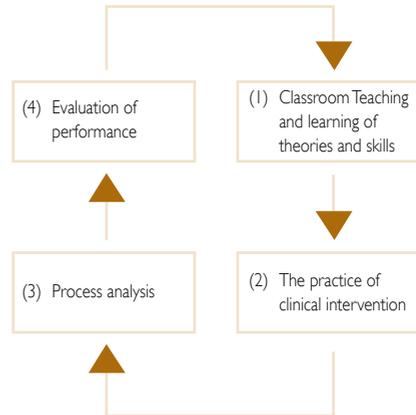
Besides, the practice of evidence-based intervention involves a five-step process (Baker & Keijnen, 2000, pp.18-19): (1) formation of clinical questions, (2) search for the best evidence, (3) appraisal of that evidence for validity and importance, (4) application of clinical practice, and (5) evaluation of performance. With the advert of multimedia, it has become possible to stimulate and effect such learning and practice in the real environment other than classroom-based learning.

As mentioned above, faculty members and students worked in groups to go through the five-step process in which they determined the questions to ask, the methods to gather data, the ways to interpret the data obtained, the criteria of selection of theories, the practice behaviours or strategies to adopt and the effectiveness of such clinical intervention.

In relation to the four-step cycle, every student and professional team member had related programmes or completed courses on theories with individuals and families: The first step of the cycle - classroom teaching and learning took place before the interview sessions.

The second step - practice of clinical intervention that involved the conversations with the users and the reflecting process - was gone through in the team. The process involved the exploration of what and why questions to ask along the team members' reflections and the users' feedback on the interview process and what worked or were helpful to them. The collaborative process deconstructed the demarcation of power hierarchy and status between the service recipient and the professional team with the two groups uniting together to explore problem formation and resolution. The five-step evidence-based intervention was also carried out in the process. In addition, the attitude of user self-determination, and respect and trust for people was practiced in this phase of intervention.

The third step - process analysis - was done after the interview process was transcribed by the Hong Kong Blind Union. Contents of the interview process were analysed to develop themes and sub-themes of the lives of the users, and what they saw as important for their lives. With the users' consent, some of the interviews were used in book chapters to illustrate knowledge and skills of certain theories such as narrative therapy.

The fourth step - evaluation of performance - was in fact carried out in step two when the group, including the users, reflected on the interview process as well as the knowledge, skills, attitudes and what was helpful after the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

Year-two and year-three social work students are being equipped with clinical concepts and skills in working with individuals and families in classroom teaching and learning, and in their fieldwork practice. In this project, students were invited as reflecting team members in clinical interventions. Through witnessing the interviews and reflection of the things/issues that struck them, students played active parts in the collaborative intervention process. The analyses and

sharing after the interviews served to enhance not only students' theory integration and skills practice, but also their personal and professional development. In the process, the students reflected upon their own attitudes as a social worker and their own history which might have impact on clinical intervention. The evaluation of performance that involved the user systems provided invaluable information or evidence of good practice. Students' involvement in clinical practice and their feedback about the process also suggested ways for alternative platforms to enhance teaching and learning.

As the four-step cycle proved to be useful for collaborative teaching, learning and intervention, it could be adopted in courses such as Theory & Practice core courses in both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Examples include Theory & Practice in Social Work (Individual Work) and Social Work with Families.

Limitations/Difficulties

The involvement of students in the project was on a voluntary basis, with less than 10 students participated in the interviews with users and the reflecting professional team. There might be several reasons for students' lack of involvement:

1. The students could be involved in the planning stage and more in the analysis of the transcripts and interview process afterwards to enhance a sense of ownership;

2. More involvement would mean a devotion of extra time and energy in the process. The social work students are very busy, particularly during the fieldwork placement period.

3. Some students reiterated that despite the invaluable learning opportunities in the reflecting team and the process, the participation of other colleagues and professionals of comparatively higher status did create pressure on them to express their opinions and views. This position did not change much with encouragement. More efforts to make collaboration an equal and mutual learning process with change of attitudes in the status quo would be necessary.

4. The attempt to involve the users that the students were serving was unsuccessful as it was really difficult to convince the agencies or the service units to allow interviews with their users to be carried out at another place.

Conclusion

This project supported the practice of evidence-based clinical intervention where the users and the helping professionals (including the social work students) worked as a team to reflect upon the interview process, the exact questions that worked and helped the users, the exploration and practice of knowledge, skills and, most importantly, attitudes that allow respect and equality among team members.

The service recipients, or the users, not only received services but also contributed to the production of knowledge and skills. The students involved in the process could witness the practice of collaborative work with the users at the centre, and the mutual learning process served as invaluable examples of practice in teaching of individual and family work in the undergraduate, postgraduate and other social work training programmes offered by the Department of Social Work.

Students of our BSW and master programmes, and participants of our training courses found this practice-based learning very helpful and the Department has recruited a group of local practitioners for the development of indigenous skills-based intervention.

Further exploration of this model of teaching and learning could be made possible, with the students being informed earlier of the whole project so that they could determine how much they could involve and contribute in the planning, application and evaluation stages in the intervention cycle.

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