Arts Across the Disciplines: Using the Voices of the Oppressed and Vulnerable to Inspire Analytical Thinking in the Human Services Curricula

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This paper addresses how professors in a Social Work and Human Services Program in the Southeastern United States include voices of the oppressed and vulnerable through art forms to develop analytical thinking to prepare human service practitioners. This pedagogical practice is based on Gardner’s discussion of Multiple Intelligences. The authors also offer examples, discuss outcome measures for each, cite student responses, and provide considerations for inclusion in course work. This article is focused on human services curricula, such as social work, psychology, clinical psychology, and counseling, but the concepts can be used in a variety of human services professional education settings.

To be an effective teacher, the professor must include pedagogy that reaches as many students as possible. Students learn in different ways, and including arts in pedagogy allows the professor to reach students with an array of learning and information processing techniques. Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences provide a model for conceptualizing these differences, and includes linguistic, logical, visual-spatial, body-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, and naturalist intelligences (Gardner, 1999, 2011). Gardner asserts that each one of us has multiple intelligences, but the amounts vary. The intelligences are found in various parts of the brain and can work together or separately. As educators we can either help weaken these intelligences, or we can reinforce them (Lunenburg & Lunenburg, 2014). This paper addresses how two professors include voices of the oppressed and vulnerable from various art forms to assist future practitioners in the human services field gain knowledge, understanding, and application of required professional competencies. In addition, the authors include outcome measures for each example, cite typical student responses and provide suggestions of items for inclusion in the curriculum. This teaching approach is used across the curriculum in lower and upper division undergraduate classes as well as graduate classes.

Background

Education, especially higher education, tends to focus on the linguistic and logical intelligences (Lunenburg & Lunenburg, 2014). As a consequence, students with these intelligences are most successful academically. When they become teachers, they tend to use the style or styles most comfortable to them, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the pattern, and perhaps, inadvertently, excluding those whose intelligences fall in
other areas. This emphasis on limited forms of intelligences does not completely capture the human service values of individual worth, diversity, and strengths-based perspectives. Such values are clearly expressed in the competencies and ethics of human services disciplines, such as human services, social work, and counseling psychology. These are codified in the Council for Standards in Human Service Education (CSHSE, 2015), Council of Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015), Society of Counseling Psychology of American Psychological Association (SCP, n.d.); National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW, 2008) Code of Ethics, and National Organization for Human Services (NOHS, 2015) Code of Ethics (see Table 1).

Gardner (1999) describes intelligence as “biopsychosocial potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture” (p. 23). This view of intelligence as different from Intelligence Quotient levels was a paradigm shift in looking at a person’s intelligence (Ghazi, Shahzada, Gilani, Shabbir, & Rashid, 2011). Gardner (1999) explains how cognitive skills are developed and how a person can use his or her intelligence in some areas but not in others. Gardner started with seven different intelligences, linguistic, logical, visual-spatial, body-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and musical, but later added an eighth: naturalist (Gardner, 2011). He further states that because we are strong in one form of intelligence does not mean that we are weak in others. He also stresses that different intelligences are not synonymous with learning styles. Instead he recommends that educators individualize their teaching, drop the word styles and pluralize teaching, or teach curricular materials in several different ways.

Textbooks can be valuable classroom tools, by concisely providing material on important topics. There are also some challenges with textbooks in that the material is often stated in an authoritative voice and may present a single point of view (Zickler & Abbott, 2000). In their presentation of the material, textbooks may be intimidating and thus fail to stimulate discussion or provide real life insights (Cleovoulou, 2008). They may also create barriers to delivering diversity and social justice content (Deepak, Rountree, & Scott, 2015). A professor’s reviews of textbooks used in Human Services classes revealed that some textbooks use value-laden (or even judgmental) terms despite human services’ insistence on the importance of diversity in persons and experience (A. Peters, personal communication, September 15, 2014; American Psychological Association (APA), 2012; CSWE, 2015). Textbooks may be acceptable, if the author’s values are expressed openly, so that students are not led to believe that this is the only view. On the other hand, use of various art forms allows for more diversity of voices than the textbook author and the professor. They also allow the material to speak to students from a range of settings and cultures. Arts help to expand the notion of who the authority is, to include author/artist and students who come to the classroom with a wide range of experiences.

The field of human services approaches “the objective of meeting human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base…” (CSHSE, 2013, p. 1, para. 4). It stands to reason then, that students should be prepared to model this behavior by experiencing learning in an interdisciplinary manner. Furthermore, as professors in the human services field, it is important to impart the acquisition of certain theories as well as competencies as established by the discipline. Arts, such as poetry, storytelling,
and theatre, have been used in the social work classroom to emphasize non-verbal and metaphoric language (Sinding, Warren, & Paton, 2014). This use of the arts has been shown to help students acquire empathy, make ethical decisions, and increase critical thinking abilities (Turner, 2013).

In this paper, the professors describe using art forms, including music, poetry, novels, essays, social criticism, memoirs, film, and drama to express the voices of oppressed and vulnerable populations. This pedagogical practice honors the multiple intelligences of both artist and student and connects the students with both theory and professional competencies (see Tables 1 and 2 for an overview). Although competencies cited here relate to professional human services education in the United States, similar competencies exist in other countries (e.g., Australian Association of Social Workers, 2003; Health & Care Professions Council, 2012).

**Arts in the Classroom**

Music can set the tone for a class, illustrate a point, or clarify values. The use of this art form is premised foremost on musical and linguistic intelligences. For example, one of the professors uses a sound track by New Orleans Bluesman Mem Shannon (2010) titled *Wrong People are in Charge* to open a Community Intervention course. This blues genre evokes New Orleans and the Katrina disaster. The lyrics encourage students to ask the questions: Who is in charge? How did they get to be in charge? How would it be different if someone else were in charge? These questions are particularly salient considering the focus on current police and community relationships brought to light by violent interactions between the two. These questions allow students to view phenomena from a macro level/sociological perspective and demonstrate the sociological imagination. Students are interested in the music genre and ask about the musician and suggest other options as well. Furthermore, non-traditional students are given the opportunity to educate younger students on the Blues.

In the same course, the students view and listen to a video posted on the Internet called *Do they know it is Christmas?*, giving the students the opportunity to use visual-spatial and musical intelligences. This fundraising cut by Band-Aid 30 (2014), subtitled *Buy the Song. Stop the Virus.*, is intended to raise money to stop the Ebola virus in some unstated fashion. It opens with a vignette of aid workers removing the emaciated corpse of a partially dressed African woman from her home. Then it cuts to elegantly dressed celebrities arriving at the recording studio in limos. In their discussions, the students generally pick up on cultural insensitivity, including wondering why a primarily Muslim country should care that it is Christmas, particularly in light of the devastation of the Ebola virus. The social and cultural differences between the people singing and the video pictured of the Ebola victim are marked, as is the apparent disregard for the dignity of the dead African woman. Thus the students are applying and integrating social stratification, cultural, and humanistic theories into their learning (Marx, 1967; Weber, 1947, 1958). In addition, in accordance with various human services competencies, students learn about cultural diversity, multiculturalism and social justice, socio-economic status and advocacy, the differences of governance and economics, political and ideological aspects of human
services, international and global influences on service, skills to effect and influence social policy, the worth and uniqueness of individuals, and the importance of welfare of others (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2015; CSHSE, 2013; CSWE 2015; SCP, n.d.). To measure the outcome of the resulting learning, class discussions are used. Comments from students include, “How does a donation to a celebrity fund stop Ebola?” and “How can they think it is OK to put their Christmas shopping trip next to the dead body of an African woman?” Questioning the relationship between a celebrity-led fundraiser and finding ways to stop a rapid spread of the epidemic shows evidence of critical thinking. Cultural competence is demonstrated through the understanding of the inappropriate linking of Western consumerism with the epidemic in developing countries. Further, the student identifies the violation of privacy of the woman’s dead body when used as a means to raise money.

Poems are primarily linguistic but also speak to interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. They can be romantic, humorous, festive, celebratory, and political. Poetry can demonstrate how one’s experience informs one’s interpretation of a piece of art or situation. In a Poverty and Culture course, Norman Jordan’s poem *Feeding the Lions* (1971) is used for a class discussion or essay. To maximize its impact for students, the poem is provided in both written form and a video of the author reading it to include the visual learner as well. In the piece, social workers move into a disadvantaged community to provide services and quickly leave. Based on their life experiences, students may see either the social workers or the community members as the lions. It depends on whether the lions are seen to be savage beasts to be sated or as predators destroying the weak. The classroom discussions help the students integrate conflict theory, as well as racism, power and privilege. Thus the students learn about cultural diversity and competence, social justice, advocacy, and local activism, political and ideological aspects of human services, and the worth and uniqueness of individuals, as well as how history and legislation affect service delivery (ACA, 2003; 2015; CSHSE, 2013; CSWE 2008). The professor uses essay questions to measure the acquisition of learning around these issues. Comments in student essays showing the students’ understanding of conflict theory include:

…the government seeing people as a number, higher class people seeing other people as animals, and yet trying to cover it all up with a patriotic twist…as they [people in poverty] know it [welfare system] is just for show and not because they [government] truly care.

The use of literature challenges the students to critical thinking and can help them understand and tolerate uncertainty (Zickler & Abbott, 2000). This art form, like poetry, speaks to linguistic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. James Baldwin’s wide-ranging work, as a novelist, social critic, essayist, playwright, and poet, provides a plethora of opportunities for integration into the human services curricula. Baldwin’s oeuvre can be used to teach students with strengths in linguistics, logic and interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences.

*Giovanni’s Room* (Baldwin, 1995), when used in a Human Socialization graduate course, provides the framework for discussions of human development, gender identity and sexual orientation. This semi-autobiographical coming of age and
coming out story is set in Paris. David, a young American man has moved to Paris to find himself and separate himself from his father. He becomes engaged to an American woman, also finding herself in Paris. She travels separately for some time. During this period, David has an affair with another immigrant, Giovanni, a young Italian man. Sexual identity, sexual orientation, and the impact of culture are key elements of the novel and allow for discussion of Erikson’s (1968) developmental theory. This is prominent in Giovanni and David who vary between Erikson’s stages of identity and role confusion and intimacy and isolation depending on their cultural setting. Conflict theory (Marx, 1967; Weber, 1947, 1958) is a key element as students examine the power differentials between David and Giovanni and Giovanni and his harassing boss Guillaume. Students acquire knowledge about human development theory, expand their recognition of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning (LGBTIQ) issues, begin to understand the context of the role of diversity, learn to analyze and interpret historical data for application in advocacy and social change, and gain regard for the worth and uniqueness of the individual (ACA, 2012; CSHSE, 2013; CSWE, 2008).

Students also view a video of the 1965 Baldwin v. Buckley debate at Cambridge University (Baldwin, 1965). Video viewing caters to the visual-spatial and logical learner. The topic of the debate, The American Dream is at the Expense of the American Negro, allows students to see Baldwin’s intellect at work, as well as hearing powerful oratory on oppression. The debate structure also speaks to students with strong logical intelligence. Students bring together the debate video and the semiautobiographical coming of age novel in an essay question. They are asked to address Baldwin in an imaginary meeting on a plane on a way to a conference. Competencies addressed in the video viewing are multicultural and social justice among others (ACA, 2015). The acquisition of these learning outcomes is expressed in this student’s writing as she talks to Baldwin:

You became a spokesman for the different, the rights of all mankind...

Baldwin’s (1986) The Evidence of Things not Seen is a social criticism and political essay about the missing and murdered children cases in Atlanta in the mid-1980s. Political essays tap into linguistic and logical intelligences. Baldwin writes about power and corruption in government, racial politics and social class. The professor, who was employed by the Atlanta Police Department at the time, includes discussions on social class, racism, and political power, integrating conflict theory in the learning experience for the students. The students learn about the context and the role of diversity, analyze and interpret historical data for application in advocacy and social change, and are exposed to a spectrum of political ideologies as well as economic
and social class systems, including systemic causes of poverty and their impact on social justice (ACA, 2015; CSHSE, 2013; CSWE, 2015). Analytical book reviews and classroom discussions measure the outcomes of learning. A recent classroom discussion of the missing and murdered children cases was eye opening to “Poverty and Culture” students. Current discussion of class and racial oppression in crime and law enforcement was set in a historical context for the students in the Atlanta metropolitan area.

Memoirs tell of a person’s life. They allow the reader, in this case, the student, to experience a life that may be very different from their own, through linguistic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. *Experiencing Poverty: Voices from the Bottom* (Eitzen & Smith, 2009), serves as a text for a Poverty and Culture class. This book gives the oppressed a voice through memoirs and essays by persons living in poverty, those who were poor, and social scientists who include their voices. As Eitzen and Smith states, “If we ignore the voices of the poor, we have dehumanized them, making their humanity invisible” (p. viii). Students learn about conflict theory, social stratification, inequality, prejudice and discrimination, and structural barriers to mobility (ACA, 2015; CSHSE, 2013; CSWE, 2015; SCP, n.d.). The evidence of acquiring awareness of social inequality and conflict theory is shown in this comment from a student:

> The readings from “Experiencing Poverty: Voices from the bottom” made me realize that the poor are not all lazy, and in fact are some of the hardest working people in the country who do the most unglamorous jobs, yet are paid the least and treated the worst.

A Death, Dying, and Bereavement course uses the memoir *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom, 1997) which tells the story of the dying process of a sociology professor. In the book, the professor reflects on his life as described by a former student of his. Mitch Albom (1997) is a renowned sports journalist, who feels he may have lost himself in his success. He visits his former professor weekly on Tuesdays after his professor’s diagnosis of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). During these weekly sessions, Mitch facilitates a life review for Morrie. The students in the bereavement class discuss the vulnerability of the dying, and apply grief and developmental theories to the content (e.g., Doka & Martin, 2010; Erikson, 1968; Stroebe & Schut, 2010; Worden, 2008). The students are thus incorporating and applying theories of human development, gaining understanding of changing family structures and roles, acquiring insight into the capacities, limitations, and resiliency of human systems, and the conscious use of self (CSHSE, 2013; CSWE, 2015). They also start clarifying personal and professional values and develop strategies of self-care (APA, 2012; SCP, n.d.). Essay questions and classroom discussions are used to ascertain the acquisition of learning outcomes. The following represents typical student comments showing conscious use of self, “It taught me that life can change so fast and drastically and I don’t want that to be the last thought like, ‘Why didn’t I do more or see more?’” and:

> If I get to an older age and I do a life review, have I done everything I wanted to do? Have I lived my life to the fullest? And that’s got me to create a bucket
I have to make sure I have hopes and dreams and that I have ways to achieve those...it [course] has made me think about how I can make my life fulfilling before I get to the death and dying point.

Also used in the Death, Dying, & Bereavement course is the movie *Rabbit Hole* (Kidman & Mitchell, 2010). Films, like literature, can create critical thinking among students and help them better accept ambiguity (Zickler & Abbott, 2000). Some of the learning styles supported in the use of movies include linguistic, visual-spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. *Rabbit Hole* is the story of a family left vulnerable due to the loss of their young son in an accident. As they struggle to come to terms with their loss, the husband and wife grieve the loss of their son in different ways, which leads to conflict in the marriage. A third main character in the movie is the young man who inadvertently killed the couple’s son with his car. Several various grief reactions and grief theories can be applied to the movie: Worden’s grief model (2008); Silverman’s continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996); Stroebe and Schut’s (2010) dual process model, Doka’s Intuitive versus Instrumental grieving patterns (Doka & Martin, 2010); and Gilbert’s narrative approach (Besley, 2002) among others. Also incorporated and applied to the movie is Erikson’s (1968) developmental theory. The students thus apply theory of human development, learn about the changing family structures and roles, and begin to understand the capacities, limitations, and resiliency of human systems (CSHSE, 2013; CSWE, 2015). A test, in the form of application questions, is the outcome measure used for this course together with essay questions. One student gave the following comment, as part of her answer to an essay question on working with the bereaved population, showing evidence of increased theoretical knowledge and her own capacity to deal with the grieving population:

I feel like I’m more equipped with those terms to know what they mean and to differentiate between those and I feel like I can help more people now. I don’t feel like it’s something I run away from in the medical setting, now that I know more about the subject.

Drama, where actors depict and act out stories, can easily be incorporated into human services curricula. Drama reinforces the learning of students with kinesthetic, visual-spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. In a Death, Dying, and Bereavement course, the professor utilizes a performance, *Fragments of Grief* (Potazek & McClatchey, 1997), presented by professional actors from a local non-profit theatre group. The professor of the class, together with the creative director of the theatre group, created this play. It was originally produced for children and adolescents who attend a local healing camp for bereaved children. The play follows two teenagers, Andrew and Heather, who have lost a brother to murder and a mother to a car accident. Their grief reactions and the insensitive reactions of their friends, relatives, and community are powerfully portrayed. After the actors perform the play, the students
apply their newly learned concepts to the story. The students learn about grief and developmental theories and changing family structures and roles, gain an understanding of the capacities, limitations, and resiliency of human systems, as well as the worth and uniqueness of individuals (CSHSE, 2013; CSWE, 2015; SCP, n.d.). To measure the outcome of competency specifications, the students write a reflection paper identifying the concepts depicted in the play. These were one student’s comments in regards to his dawning recognition about the uniqueness of each person and situation:

The play opened me up to be more competent to those who have lost a loved one. I can approach conversations with awareness and sympathy knowing that their experience is going to be unique to them and their emotions. The biggest takeaway I took from the play was that everyone grieves differently. The process is individual. What may work for me may not work for someone else. In knowing this, I have to be careful when talking to people who are experiencing grief. At the same time, I shouldn’t be shy when asking them questions about what would work best for them. In order to best help an individual in grief, I must meet them where they are at, knowing their biggest needs and concerns.

Discussion

In this paper, the authors have described how they use arts in the classroom to impart knowledge, values, and skills to correspond with competencies for a range of human services disciplines, as set out in ACA (2003, 2012, 2015), APA (2012), CSHSE (2013), CSWE (2015), and SCP (n.d). Using the voices of the oppressed and vulnerable through different art forms allows professors to introduce curriculum materials to students in different ways from regular textbooks and lets students apply a range of intelligences (Gardner, 1999, 2006, 2011). To measure the outcome of the learning experience, several methods are used: classroom discussions, tests, essays, book reviews, reflection papers, and correspondence from past students. The importance of implementing pedagogical practice curricula to deliver social justice and diversity content cannot be overstated in the human service professions (Deepak et al., 2015).

Considerations

Professors using the arts in the classroom need to consider several issues (see Figure 1). Among them are:

**Multiple intelligences.** The notion of multiple intelligences recognizes the need to select a variety of art forms. Music, for example, appeals to those students who possess musical intelligence. Drama may speak to those with visual-spatial and body kinesthetic intelligences. Memoirs are an example of an art form that would tap into interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences of students.

**Selection of material.** Any reading list should be chosen with consideration to professional competencies, genre, level of accessibility, voice of the author, diversity of topic, application to course concepts and theories, literary values and timeliness. The professors’ control and selection of the course materials are critical, since students may
be heavily influenced on the topics by the media rather than the substance of the materials (Turner, 2013).

**Ethical issues.** Some authors have spoken of the importance of ethical behaviors in the materials presented in the sense that characters are acting in ethical manners (Moxley, Feen-Calligan, & Washington, 2012). On the other hand, it might also be argued that depictions of persons acting in unethical manners provide a base for a discussion of culture and decision making in difficult situations.

**Choice of main characters.** In all the art forms, there are primary characters for consideration. Students may benefit from exposure to characters like themselves, in order to gain insights into their own experience (Turner, 2013). Alternatively, students may benefit from exposure to characters unlike themselves, in order to push them to empathize with the Other. Selections need to provide a variety of characters in order to ensure that students can benefit in both ways.

**Choice of author/artist.** As noted earlier, use of art forms allows students to see a variety of persons as authorities. Diversity in authors and artists provides a voice of authority from a wider range of voices than the usual textbook author. Choice of author/artist should include: persons of color, vulnerable and oppressed populations, people of different ages, abilities, gender identities, nonheteronormative individuals, cultural and religious minorities, etc., in order to broaden the platform of voices.

**Student input.** When professors use these art forms, students are sensitized to seeing the concepts in everyday life and art. It is the professors’ experience that once students begin to make these connections, they make further recommendations of art materials for inclusion in classes. These suggestions have included books, film, poetry, speakers, editorials, documentaries, essays and TED Talks.

**Conclusion**

The human services curricula offer opportunities to incorporate the arts to deliver content about the oppressed and vulnerable and to achieve professional competencies. Professors need to consider the array of intelligences (Gardner, 1999, 2011) of her/his students as well as make every attempt to engage them in the learning experience. Using the voices of the oppressed and vulnerable through various art forms helps expand the students’ insights. In this paper, the authors discussed using already existing art. Other art forms, not mentioned here, might include the use of proverbs, editorial writing, dance, cartoons, quotations, and rap. However, professors may also have students create their own art, as a response to course content, experience, or issues of concern. Foremost, the professor must be open to new materials and course pedagogy in order to deliver knowledge and views from the oppressed and vulnerable, encourage student engagement, and maintain currency.

Use of the pedagogy described in this paper begs the question of comparison of awareness of learning outcomes in classrooms where teachers use traditional approaches and do not integrate the arts. This would be an interesting topic for a future study where multiple sections of a single course are possible. A common syllabus with shared rubrics would provide a critical tool to assess the impact of arts in the classroom.
References


Band-Aid 30. (2014). *Do they know it is Christmas?* Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-w7jyVHocTk


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<th>Art Form</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<td>The Evidence of Things not Seen</td>
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Table 2

Learning Styles and Genres in Human Services Curricula

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<th>Intelligence*</th>
<th>Examples of Genres</th>
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<td>Logical/Mathematics</td>
<td>Essay, social criticism</td>
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<td>Experiential</td>
<td>Drama, role play, video</td>
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Note. *Gardner, 2011
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Figure 1. Considerations when applying arts to human services curricula.

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