

Enhancing Learning by Integrating Theory and Practice

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Educators in professional degree programs are charged with multiple responsibilities in the classroom and in practice settings. We apply our professional knowledge in a variety of settings to serve our communities; we reflect on how to improve practice from our experiences in these settings; we observe our students engaging in learning experiences in the classroom; and we share with our students the knowledge we've gained from our experiences and our scholarship within our profession. To accomplish these actions we must serve as both teacher and learner in both classroom and field. Moreover, we want our students to also benefit from the active learning processes of applying, reflecting, sharing, and observing both in and out of the classroom while also functioning as both learners and teachers. Although we can accomplish all these goals over an entire curriculum, this article seeks to provide an example of one teacher's attempt to achieve these goals within a single Social Work course in Death and Grief. A model is provided that demonstrates how the interactive process works for both the teacher and students in this course and could be adapted for use in other courses incorporating practice settings as part of the curricula.

Educators in professional or service-related fields desire their students not only to learn theory and understand why theories are important but also to learn how to apply the theoretical frameworks in practice. Too often we hear anecdotal accounts of students in internships who are unable to make this transition from theory to practice with confidence and effectiveness. Perhaps the difficulty in making the transition from theory to practice arises, at least in part, from a failure of the teacher to integrate both theory and practice into the same course in the curriculum in ways that are relevant and meaningful to the student. Such integration helps students to more closely associate the practical value of learning theoretical concepts.

It is imperative that students in professional programs be able to put into practice what they have learned in the classroom. As Hutchings (1990) wrote, "What's at stake is the capacity to perform, to put what one knows into practice (p. 1)." To help students become capable and competent practitioners requires that they have training in self-awareness, knowledge acquisition, and skill building (Kramer, 1998). According to Shebib (2003), practitioners need to have skills in four areas: relationship building, exploring or probing, empowering, and challenging. An essential additional skill is the ability to gain and utilize knowledge from practice (Dorfman, 1996). Mendenhall (2007) says that in order for students to develop these skills, education at the master's level, as well as practical experience, is necessary and expected. What can we do in our classrooms to increase student success, not only in their internships but most importantly in work settings following graduation? How can we use classroom teaching to enhance the ability of students to put what they've learned into practice, and how can we use that improved practice to

enhance classroom learning? As Fiszer (2004) states in his book *How Teachers Learn Best*, "The resulting data point to the need for an ongoing professional development model that directly connects training and practice" (p. 1).

It is the goal of this article to describe how this classroom/practice/classroom process can be incorporated into a curriculum via an enhanced learning model, even in courses not centered on clinical, internship, or service-learning requirements. The course used to illustrate this process is a course in Death and Grief in Contemporary Society taught at an accredited BSW/MSW Social Work program at a private university in the Midwest section of the United States.

Before describing the process, we will discuss the value of integrating practical experience into a curriculum and discuss the learning methods upon which the model is based.

The Value of Experience

Professional programs must prepare workers to become professional practitioners in their chosen field of practice. As educators, we want our students to appreciate the importance of both classroom and field educational experiences and learn that there is nothing more practical than a good theory. While experience is a great teacher, it cannot replace what can be best taught in a classroom and vice versa. A case could be made that the best learning environment is created when these two learning modalities are integrated within a course rather than partitioned throughout multiple courses in the curriculum. What do we gain by integrating practical experience into a course primarily structured around the modality of classroom learning?

Boud, Cohen, and Walker (1993) believe that experience is the central consideration of all learning. They argue that learning builds on and flows from experience and that “learning can only occur if the experience of the learner is engaged, at least at some level” (p. 8). One way to enhance student learning is by the integration of teaching and practice of the instructor. Dewey, in his essay “The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education” (Dewey, 1904/1974), expressed the belief that content knowledge (i.e., scholarship) should not be remote from the practical issues that teachers face. He believed that teachers’ practical knowledge could serve as a valuable resource for enhancing educational theory. A study by Kramer, Polifroni, and Organek (1986) showed that students taught by a practicing faculty member scored higher on professional characteristics (including autonomy, self-concept, and self-esteem) than did students taught by non-practicing faculty. Practicing faculty can enhance the teaching environment for these reasons:

1. The instructor has credibility through maintaining active client contact;
2. The instructor has credibility through keeping clinical practice skills current (including maintaining licensure);
3. Teaching becomes grounded in practice;
4. The instructor is able to relate theory to practice effectively;
5. Students can detect whether a teacher is comfortable in his/her clinical area;
6. Positive role modeling can occur (for example, the use of critical thinking); and
7. The instructor has opportunities for updating course content based on practice experiences and exposure to new challenges. (Good & Schubert, 2001)

We make the assumption that teaching leads to learning, but it is the experiences that teaching helps create that prompt learning (Boud et al., 1993). When a teacher uses an example from his or her own experience, learning can occur and can stimulate a desire for further learning (Boud et al., 1993).

One of the authors draws from her clinical experience in counseling while illustrating the value of theory in the classroom. She finds that student interest is more strongly piqued through these anecdotal experiences than through the use of textbook vignettes. For example, sharing her experience as a grief counselor and grief group facilitator brings to life the grieving experiences of people in need. By sharing one’s on-going current experiences with students, the instructor heightens their interest and increases the relevance of the

material. Students are able to ask questions such as “How did you handle that?” and the teacher can ask, “What would you do in a case like that?” In this way, the theory becomes clearer and more easily applicable to the real cases they face in a practice situation.

Several literatures have addressed the desirability of enhancing learning by integrating theory and practice, or classroom and field, within professional degree programs in human services education or other degree programs. A review of these literatures appears below.

Literature Review: The Integration of Theory and Practice

Active Learning

Although experience may be the foundation of learning, it does not automatically or even necessarily always lead to it (Boud et al., 1993). Using an active learning environment can enhance the integration of practice and theory in the classroom. We think of active learning as using instructional activities involving students doing things and thinking about what they are doing. Some characteristics of active learning are:

- Students are involved in more than listening;
- Less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on development of students’ skills;
- Students are involved in higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation);
- Students are engaged in activities (such as writing, reading, discussing, and observing); and
- Greater emphasis is placed on students’ exploration of their attitudes and values. (Bonwell & Eison, 1991)

These components involve activities that allow students to clarify, question, consolidate, and appropriate new knowledge (Meyers & Jones, 1993). An active learning environment should promote students’ interest in the subject and encourage their participation. We want our students to sense that we are enthusiastic about our teaching and confident in their learning abilities. Students will quickly determine if a teacher respects their contributions in class, or even wants contributions at all. Both are critical in creating an active learning environment (Meyers & Jones, 1993).

It is also important for teachers to create an environment that allows students to take risks. This environment includes:

- Being strongly interested in students as individuals;
- Acknowledging students' feelings about an assignment or other pertinent items;
- Encouraging students to ask questions;
- Communicating both openly and subtly that each person's learning is important; and
- Encouraging students to be creative and independent and form their own views. (Bonwell & Eison, 1991)

One important component of the active learning model that distinguishes it from other learning models is an emphasis on experience rather than merely listening as a means of acquiring knowledge (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Coulshed, 1993; Felder & Brent, 2003). Miller and Boud (1996) argue that experience is indispensable for learning to occur: "Experience cannot be bypassed; it is the central consideration of all learning" (p. 9).

Constructivism

Constructivism is concerned with explaining how knowledge is produced in the world. It is also a field of inquiry by educators seeking to describe how students learn. As Windschitl (1999) notes, constructivism is based on the belief that learners work to create, interpret, and reorganize knowledge in individual ways: "These fluid intellectual transformations occur when students reconcile formal instructional experiences with their existing knowledge, with the cultural and social contexts in which ideas occur, and with a host of other influences that mediate understanding" (Windschitl, 1999, p. 752). According to Gordon (2009), this suggests that teachers should promote experiences that require students to become active learners—scholarly participators in the learning process. Freire (1970/1994) likewise argued that learning requires active participation of the student, and that knowledge arises out of a shared process of inquiry, interpretation, and creation.

Developing what he refers to as a pragmatic constructivist discourse from the writings of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Freire, Gordon (2009) points out that "these four theorists share a conception of constructivism that is essentially pragmatic, one that is deeply concerned with a changing current educational practice to foster active learning and genuine understanding" (p. 50). More specifically, Gordon cites Dewey's (1988) belief that genuine knowledge derives not from abstract thought, or by acting uncritically, but rather by integrating thinking and doing, by getting the mind to reflect on the act. From Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, Gordon (2009) asserts that human learning, mental

development, and knowledge are embedded in a particular social and cultural context, as when students work with peers under teacher supervision. Thus, the act of sharing insights and reflections with peers is part of the pragmatic constructivist discourse.

Another element of pragmatic constructivism is attributed to Freire's (1970/1994) notion of problem-posing education, where the teacher is no longer one who only teaches, but one who also learns through the dialogue with the students. Similarly, students in this model are not only learners, but also take on the responsibility of becoming co-teachers in the learning process:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. (Freire, 1970/1994, p. 61)

This statement reinforces the concept that knowledge is a shared process of inquiry and creation.

"Real World" Learning and Adult Education

Governmental regulations in both Europe and the United States have begun to emphasize the need for an appropriately qualified social care workforce (Forrester-Jones & Hatzidimitriadou, 2006). These initiatives will result in more comprehensive training and education mechanisms, including systems of continuing education (Dubois, McKee, & Nolte, 2005). One program funded to increase the number of qualified social care workers was a Certificate in Community Care Practice at the University of Kent, intended to "develop individual confidence in relating theory to practice" (DoH, 1999). Indeed, it has been said that one of the major goals of higher education is to help college students develop as professionals who are able to deal with real-world problems (Choi & Lee, 2008), that is, to know how to put theory into practice.

In the *Handbook of Experiential Learning and Management Education*, Hornyak, Green, and Heppard (2007) assert that people learn best from direct experience coupled with guided reflection and analysis. Citing the work of Kolb (1984) and Fenwick (2001), they make the point that experiences alone are not sufficient for learning to take place. Experience must be followed by reflective thought and an internal processing that links the experience with previous learning, transforming the learner's previous understanding in some manner. Learning, therefore, takes place within a cycle that includes action, reflection, and application. Such cycles are common to

many experiential learning models involving real-world experiences. For example, Kember (2000), in his book, *Action Learning and Action Research*, refers to a learning cycle involving planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

Theory and Practice in Social Work

A review of the literature on the integration of theory and practice within the social work discipline discovered several studies that found that graduates of social work degree programs felt that their class work had not adequately prepared them for real world practice (Clapton & Cree, 2004). Thompson (2000), for example, makes the point that “there is an unacceptable gap between theory and practice, a disjuncture between what is taught or learned and what is practiced.... Theory has come to be seen as the preserve of the academic and practice as the domain of the practitioner” (p. 84). Clapton and Cree (2004) conclude that there is a need for learning models that integrate theory and practice in ways that bring the field into the classroom as well as take the classroom into the field. They go on to state that this goal should be pursued throughout the student’s educational experience and not relegated to a single clinical internship course.

We will now describe how a course in Death and Grief used classroom learning and practice experience so that both teacher and students could apply the learning techniques of applying, sharing, reflecting, and observing.

Integration of Theory and Practice: An Example in a Course in Death and Grief

An enhanced learning model is helpful in teaching a course on death and grief because many students have little personal experience with the subject, and most have a resistance to, or even a fear of, the subject of death and grief. At the beginning of the semester the teacher sets the stage for class participation by emphasizing that students will have varying opinions, experiences, and beliefs, and that each student’s right to his/her opinion should be respected. The instructor consistently models this behavior in class, and gently reminds the students of this “policy” when there is a temptation to neglect it (for instance, when someone laughs at a statement by another student, the teacher will remind the class that the student is entitled to his opinion, and will follow up with a normalizing statement to the student). Class participation is solicited and genuinely respected by the teacher. In creating a safe environment for student participation, the teacher sets the tone for a learning environment for everyone, the teacher included.

Relating anonymous case examples from the instructor’s various volunteer community service experiences in grief counseling with both adults and adolescents provides an opportunity for students to ask questions and understand and apply theories from the textbook to real situations. Guest speakers who practice in the community are also utilized, and students are able to glean practical application from their expertise and experiences.

Using an enhanced learning model in the Death and Grief class, the students:

- Listen to guest speakers, to grieving individuals in interviews conducted by students, and to videos depicting death and grief scenarios;
- Develop skills by hearing from the instructor and guest speakers about what works;
- Collaborate in learning through sharing experiences: presentations, class discussions, and small-group discussions;
- Engage in higher order thinking by evaluating and writing about their feelings and reactions, analyzing children’s grief books or synthesizing course information;
- Observe grieving individuals and learn of effective intervention practices;
- Reflect on what they have learned in and out of the classroom, write their reflections in a journal, and share them with the instructor; and
- Apply what they learn in field settings.

The use of active learning techniques helps students to gain exposure to this topic in a stimulating and interactive environment. It provides students opportunities to talk and listen to each other’s responses to questions, to the teacher, and to guest speakers. They are provided various questions, questionnaires, simulations, and case examples from which to draw on their own beliefs and experiences to stimulate class or small-group interactions.

A Learning Model to Enhance the Integration of Theory and Practice

We are guided in our development of a learning model for the social work class in Death and Grief from the various literatures reviewed here. The active learning literature stresses that learning is best achieved when students are actively involved in a cyclical process that includes observing, applying, reflecting, and sharing their experiences. From the social and pragmatic constructivist literature, we see that students learn best as active learners who integrate thinking and

acting, who reflect on the act, and who share their reflections and observations with others. This literature also stresses that learning is enhanced when it arises from environments where the traditional roles of teacher and students are expanded to include teacher-as-student and students-as-teachers. From the “real world” classroom literature we are told that students in social service professional degree programs should be intentional life-long learners accustomed to learning across different settings (e.g., in the field as well as in the classroom).

Appendices A and B present models in which classroom teaching/learning enhances practice and practice enhances classroom learning/teaching for both student and teacher. Active learning objectives are achieved when both the teacher and students assume the roles of both teacher and student at different stages of the iterative process. Here’s how the process works:

Teacher

Using the course in Death and Grief as well as community practice with two grief support groups as a learning/service environment:

Teacher in practice.

- As a teacher, when moderating community grief support groups, the instructor applies knowledge gained from scholarship on the subject and from observing students’ experiences in the classroom, and
- As a student, the instructor reflects on the unique needs and experiences of individuals who are in grief support groups, as well as on those methods of grief counseling that work best in different circumstances.

Teacher in the classroom.

- As a student, observes students individually or interacting in groups as they process the knowledge they have gained on the subject through discussions, case analysis, role playing, presentations, etc., and
- As a teacher, shares knowledge of the subject gained through study and scholarship and by bringing to the classroom firsthand experiences of grieving individuals and information about specific interventions that were helpful in their grieving process.

Student

The model provides enhancement of learning for the student in both the classroom and practice settings.

Student as student.

- In the classroom, reflects on knowledge gained from listening to the teacher, guest speakers, other students and from reading the textbook. Students write reflective journal entries based on classroom materials, readings, class activities, guest speakers, videos, and anything they have thought about related to the subject. A journal entry is required for each week of the semester, and these can be handwritten or typed and handed in or e-mailed to the teacher. This allows the students to share learning reflections, as well as personal experiences or questions which they don’t want to share in class.
- In practice, observes grieving individuals and how counselors help them cope with their grief. Observation also occurs when students engage in these activities outside the classroom in practice settings: interview a terminally ill or bereaved person; interview a physician, nurse, medical social worker, or funeral home director; interview a person from another culture about their death beliefs and rituals; visit a cemetery and write a reaction paper about the experience; or watch a movie in which death is the theme and write a reaction to it.

Student as teacher.

- In practice, applies knowledge gained from the classroom and through observation in the field setting to help grieving people cope with their grief. This is done by moderating a grief support group at one of several churches offering such groups or at a community center serving children suffering the loss of a loved one.
- In the classroom, shares experiences with classmates and teacher, contributing to the learning experiences of all. Some examples of experiences shared within the classroom in groups or with the entire class include reading the book, *Tuesdays With Morrie* by Mitch Albom, and watching the movie *In the Gloaming* about a family whose son has come home dying from AIDS, and writing reaction papers and sharing their reactions with the class.

This model would work for any course in which practice examples are relevant and learning involves students acquiring skills as well as knowledge. The authors believe that the course is enhanced by the ability to apply community practice examples to the classroom and that the community work is also enhanced by the classroom preparation and learning from the students.

A notable by-product of the use of this model is to inculcate a service mentality on the part of the students. Anecdotal evidence from course evaluations suggests

that students are more enthusiastic learners when they see firsthand that what they are learning translates into benefits to those being served. Although this desirable by-product accrues most naturally to those educators in care-giving professions, teachers in other programs with a practice component can also achieve this outcome. In the classroom, a student sharing his or her feelings of making a positive difference in the lives of his or her patients/clients/subjects allows the teacher to reinforce the value of service to enrich the life of both the giver and recipient.

Conclusion

Educators of professional degree programs are constantly seeking ways to show students the importance of a solid grounding in theory in order to achieve excellence in their professional practice. This goal is achieved through both classroom and practice learning experiences. Active and constructivist learning models also stress multiple teaching modalities, including learning by doing and having the student serve as a teacher of what they are learning. In the model described, both the educator and those enrolled in the course assume the role of teacher and student at various points in the course. In these roles, all course participants maximize learning through observing, reflecting, sharing, and applying course material in classroom and practice settings. The educator's desire to balance theory/experience, classroom/practice, and student/teacher roles is most often achieved over the entire curriculum rather than in a single course. However, this article provides a model for how these pedagogical goals can be achieved through a cyclical process using a course in death and grief as an example. It is often difficult when using this model to know who has learned more from its implementation—the students or the teacher.

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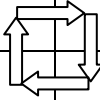
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Appendix A
Enhancing Learning: Teacher

	As Teacher	As Student
Practice	1. Applies effective grief counseling method to serve the community by facilitating grief support groups and helping grieving individuals.	2. Reflects on what grief and coping mechanisms work best with grieving individuals/clients.
Classroom	4. Shares knowledge from experience, scholarship, and study of subjects with students in a classroom setting through lectures, discussions, exercises, cases, etc.	3. Observes students interacting in groups, making presentations, analyzing cases, and engaging in role-playing exercises in the classroom.



Appendix B
Enhancing Learning: Student

	As Teacher	As Student
Practice	3. Applies classroom knowledge gained in the classroom and through observation to helping grieving people in field setting.	2. Observes grieving individuals and practitioners to learn what it means to be an effective practitioner.
Classroom	4. Shares learning experiences with classmates and teacher.	1. Reflects on knowledge gained from listening to teacher, guest speakers, experts, and other students; reading textbook; and various other activities and sources.

