Developing and Teaching an MSW Capstone Course Using Case Methods of Instruction

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Abstract: *Using an innovative process, the authors and their colleagues developed a case-oriented MSW capstone course. This article outlines the process of developing the course, choosing instructional methods and materials, and preparing instructors to teach the course. It reviews the process of teaching the course, including preparing to teach individual class sessions, identifying and dealing with several instructional challenges that emerged, and designing means to evaluate the course. The authors provide specific recommendations to faculty who wish to provide a similar course. In particular, they show how course development involves substantial, ongoing collaboration by faculty that yield exceptional benefits.*

Keywords: Social work education, case method teaching, course development, capstone course

Recently, several broad trends have profoundly changed the context for social service provision. These include: growing social and economic inequalities, diminished employment security, rollback of affirmative action programs, reduced funding for public education, increasing distrust for government as problem-solver, reduced funding for public education, shift of political power to the suburbs, spread of information technologies, increasing demographic diversity, and population aging (e.g., Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Scharlach, Damron-Rodgriguez, Robinson & Feldman, 2000). These trends have engendered remarkable changes in social service provision such as: devolution of federal responsibility, privatization of the nonprofit sector, agency reorganization (e.g., mergers, downsizing, decentralization), time-limited treatment modalities, cost-containment programs, fee-for-service reimbursement, and other funding innovations (Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar & Strom, 1997; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Strom-Gottfried, 1997; Strom & Gingerich, 1993). These changes may necessitate revision of social work education in terms of both the content provided and the processes employed. At minimum, these changes require social work educators to continually reconsider what students need to know and do upon graduation and

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to assess whether they actually know and can do these things. Indeed, as these changes accelerate, there is a growing need for educating social workers who can respond effectively to unanticipated problems and seize unforeseen opportunities (Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

IMPETUS FOR THE COURSE

In preparation for re-accreditation, faculty at the University of South Carolina College of Social Work sought curriculum-relevant information from several constituency groups (e.g., alumni, field instructors). One such group included prospective employers of our MSW graduates. Two faculty members conducted interviews with executives of 17 state and private agencies. They found that when hiring beginning practitioners, social service agency executives especially prized research and evaluation skills, critical thinking skills, writing and communication skills, and an attitude of openness and flexibility (Dalton & Wright, 1999).

This and other feedback provided the impetus for several curricular revisions. For example, faculty agreed to increase demands upon students for critical thinking and communication skills. Faculty decided to develop new, required courses in the advanced year to reunite micro and macro students and integrate these two broad content areas. In designing one of these required courses, the curriculum committee came up with the idea for an integrative capstone course. Furthermore, the committee recommended case-oriented teaching methods for this new course, and the dean assigned course development responsibility to a small faculty group.

This paper describes and explains our experience developing and teaching the new case-oriented capstone course. However, it is not simply a question of case method teaching, capstone courses, or new course development. Rather, it is about our highly collaborative problem-solving process for developing and teaching a case-based course as a capstone of our MSW program. We argue that this extensive and unconventional process reflected essential features of the case method itself, promoting both student and faculty development and contributing substantially to our success. We also suggest that case method instruction fits social work education and is particularly well suited for a capstone course.

In this paper, we first outline the process of developing this new course, including choosing instructional methods, developing course materials, and preparing ourselves to teach the course. Second, we review the process of teaching the course, including preparing to teach individual class sessions, identifying and dealing with instructional challenges, and evaluating the course. Based on our experience, we provide recommendations for faculty wishing to provide a similar course. In particular, we show how course development involved substantial, ongoing collaboration by faculty that ultimately yielded exceptional benefits.

DEVELOPING THE COURSE

Faculty envisioned the capstone course as a unique learning opportunity in the final semester of the MSW program. It was intended to provide a context for applying knowledge gained throughout the curriculum and for collaborative work by micro and macro students.

Choosing Instructional Methods

Beginning with information about desired educational outcomes, faculty sought teaching methods most likely to promote these outcomes (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Lundeberg, Levin & Harrington, 1999; Pratt & Associates, 1998). We eventually agreed to combine decision case discussion and problem-based learning (PBL) components within the course. Very briefly, decision case discussions emphasize analysis, problem formulation, and decision-making processes, while PBL projects emphasize assessment, information search, and treatment planning processes. In addition to their differing emphases, the two methods structure the learning process differently. Decision case discussions provided a diverse series of shared weekly learning experiences for all students. Problem-based learning projects provided unique, more specialized, semester-long learning experiences for small groups of students. Because both methods were case-based, they potentially reinforced key learning objectives. Nevertheless, they represented differing strengths and weaknesses. Decision cases provided more experience with problem solving across a variety of situations, while PBL cases allowed for more in-depth learning about a particular practice situation. This article focuses on the use of decision cases because that became the primary teaching method, in terms of class time, student effort, and benefits reported by students and faculty.

Since the profession's inception, social work educators have used cases for teaching students about practice realities (Reynolds, 1942; Towle, 1954). Traditionally, however, "cases" have most often been used to illustrate theoretical concepts or to depict practice situations and the appropriate professional responses (Welsh & Wolfer, 2000; also, see, for example, LeCroy, 1992, 1999; McClelland, Austin & Este, 1998; Rivas & Hull, 1996, 2000). In contrast, the case methods selected for the capstone course represent specific innovations that have recently emerged in other professions (Barnes, Christensen & Hansen, 1994; Lundeberg, Levin & Harrington, 1999; Lynn, 1999), and that have sparked renewed interest among social work educators (Cossom, 1991; Welsh & Wolfer, 2000). Most significantly, they rely on open-ended cases that compel decision-making on the part of students, to both define problems and choose courses of action.

Case method teaching is frequently touted as a means for promoting critical thinking skills and better preparing students for professional practice by providing them with opportunities to exercise judgment and engage in decision-making (Barnes, Christensen & Hansen, 1994; Boehrer & Linsky, 1990; Christensen, Garvin & Sweet, 1991; Fisher, 1978; Meyers & Jones, 1993). Rather than provide information, case method teachers rely heavily upon a variation of Socratic questioning to facilitate in-depth discussion of cases (Lynn, 1999; Welty, 1989).

Case method teaching employs open-ended "decision" cases, a particular type of case specifically developed for this teaching approach. Such cases present students with the ambiguities and dilemmas of social work practice and require active decision-making (e.g., Cossom, 1991; Golembiewski & Stevenson, 1998; Lynn, 1999; Rothman, 1998). Sometimes referred to as "teaching" cases, they describe actual situations practitioners have encountered in great detail. Although clearly written and tightly edited, the cases depict situations that are often messy and ambiguous. Typically written from one practitioner's perspective, they some-

times include conflicting statements (by the various participants involved), time constraints, competing ethical values, extraneous details, and incomplete information. Because the cases are open-ended, however, they do not tell what the practitioner ultimately did or how the case turned out. As a result, the cases require that students use their analytic and critical thinking skills, their knowledge of social work theory and research, and their common sense and collective wisdom to identify and analyze problems, to evaluate possible solutions, and to formulate a preferred intervention (Welsh & Wolfer, 2000).

Writing from a business perspective, Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen (1994) argue that case method instruction helps students develop an applied "administrative point of view" (p. 50). They suggest that an administrative or practitioner point of view includes: 1) a focus on understanding the specific context; 2) a sense for appropriate boundaries; 3) sensitivity to interrelationships; 4) examining and understanding any situation from a multidimensional viewpoint; 5) accepting personal responsibility for the solution of an organizational problem; and 6) an action orientation (p. 50-51). Furthermore, an action orientation includes: a) a sense for the possible; b) willingness to make decisions on the basis of imperfect and limited data; c) a sense for the critical; d) the ability to combine discipline and creativity; e) skill in converting targets into accomplishments; and f) an appreciation of the major limits of professional action (p. 51). In short, the concept redirects our attention from what students know to their ability to use their knowledge. We came to refer to this as "thinking like a practitioner."

Developing Course Materials

As suggested above, case method teaching requires a particular type of case, a "decision" or teaching case. Decision cases that focus primarily on the macro level of social work practice are available in the published literature (e.g., Fauri, Wernet & Netting, 2000; Golembiewski & Stevenson, 1998; Golembiewski, Stevenson & White, 1997; Wood, 1996) and on the Internet (e.g., Electronic Hallway; John F. Kennedy School of Government Case Web; Program on Non-Profit Organizations), though some must be drawn from public and non-profit management. However, there are few decision cases that focus primarily on micro practice (see Rothman, 1998, for cases on ethical dilemmas in micro practice). For that reason, the college dean provided support for the first author to write or edit appropriate micro practice cases for use in the new capstone course. Although some cases were designated micro and others macro, there were interwoven micro and macro issues in each one (e.g., legal and policy context for clinical decision-making, interpersonal dynamics in state-level policy development).

The decision cases were researched and written using a process developed by Welsh (1999). A small group of experienced social workers, several of whom were also enrolled in a doctoral program, were assembled as a case writing team led by the first author. The work sessions were intense, concentrated efforts that lasted four to five hours over two days for each case. In these work sessions, a case situation was reported and discussed in depth among a small group of participants. The case writing process consisted of five steps. First, before the work session, each case reporter prepared a brief written account of a problem or decision he or she actually faced in social work practice and, using a round robin format, each

participant was assigned responsibility for writing another's case. Second, during the work session, a case reporter told the case writing team the story behind his or her account. These discussions were tape recorded to collect quotes and detailed descriptions. Third, immediately after the work session, the assigned case writer prepared a longer working draft of the case that included a title, introductory "hook," and story line with details, quotes, and descriptions. Fourth, the working draft was distributed to the case writing team to be read and discussed again at a follow-up work session. Fifth, the case writer used clarifications and further details that emerged from this discussion to prepare the final draft of the case. In addition, analytic information from the last discussion was used to prepare instructor notes for the completed case. This case writing process ensured that a case accurately reflected the practitioner's own experience and understanding of a challenging situation.

Preparing to Teach the Course

The college dean also sent the first author to a week-long conference on case method teaching. Based on this experience and with an education professor, he designed and implemented a workshop for faculty and doctoral students that included a demonstration case discussion. Subsequently, faculty and doctoral students participated in weekly discussions of the nine cases selected for the capstone course. Instructors assigned to teach the capstone course took turns leading these case discussions. Following each case discussion, the group discussed what participants had learned, the discussion leader's teaching objectives and how well the actual discussion fit these objectives, and what questions and techniques had been most/least helpful. These faculty case discussions did two important things. First, they provided an in-depth understanding of each case that was not available by simply reading the case, even repeatedly. Second, and perhaps more importantly, they provided experience with case method teaching in both student and instructor roles. On alternate weeks, instructors assigned to the capstone course continued meeting for another hour to discuss teaching plans and develop course assignments[1].

TEACHING THE COURSE

Beginning in spring 2000, seven instructors taught nine sections of the inaugural capstone course with about 170 students total. Classes met weekly for two and-a-half hours (excluding break times) during the 15-week semester. The first two weeks were spent orienting students to the course objectives and expectations, and to the purposes and processes of case method and problem-based learning instruction. In the third week of the semester we began the weekly decision case discussions, dealing with a new case each week for nine weeks. The last three weeks of the semester included presentations by the students of their problem-based learning cases on which they had collaborated throughout the semester, and a focus on issues involved in making the transition from student to practitioner. Various formative and summative evaluations were conducted during and at the completion of the course, and class time was allocated for these purposes.

During the nine weeks in which we used decision cases, the class period consisted of an instructor-facilitated case discussion lasting approximately an hour

and forty-five minutes. Instructor-led case discussions progressed through three general stages: identifying facts, analyzing the problem, and deciding how to respond. More specifically, these discussions identified facts and assumptions of the case, explored interlocking issues and dilemmas in depth, formulated problem statements, identified possible alternative strategies for resolving the identified problem, identified decision criteria, and finally compared alternatives to recommend the best intervention or course of action (Welsh & Wolfer, 2000; Welty, 1989). Most instructors concluded this case discussion with students briefly reflecting in writing on what they learned from the case and a verbal debriefing of the case discussion process. The remaining 35-45 minutes were devoted to students' work in small groups on their problem-based learning cases. The instructor was available during this time to consult with the groups.

Preparing to Teach Individual Class Sessions

Instructors agreed to meet before the first decision case discussion to create plans for facilitating the discussion and subsequently met each week before decision case discussions. In these weekly sessions, capstone instructors briefly reviewed the previous case discussion, including what had worked and what had not worked. But most importantly, they discussed possible teaching objectives for the upcoming decision case, formulated opening questions to start the class discussion, anticipated the possible course for the class discussion and planned relevant questions, discussed techniques for facilitating discussions and adding variety (e.g., role plays, small group work), and devised strategies for remediating common deficiencies in student problem-solving (e.g., problem definition, identifying alternative solutions). In general, these weekly faculty discussions provided mutual problem solving and support, both of which proved essential for successfully implementing this instructional innovation. Because it was voluntary, the consistent participation of all capstone faculty served as evidence of the perceived value of these weekly meetings.

Several instructional challenges became apparent as we taught this course. Two major themes characterized these challenges including (1) fostering students' application and critical thinking skills so that they are prepared to the greatest extent possible to "think like practitioners" and (2) managing the uncertainty and anxiety resulting from the challenges students and faculty were experiencing in this new course.

Thinking Like a Practitioner

Theoretically, our entire MSW program is designed from beginning to end to prepare students to "think like practitioners" or develop a practitioner's "point of view" (Barnes, Christensen & Hansen, 1994). However, as those of us teaching this course engaged with students in in-depth case discussions, we were surprised and somewhat alarmed that so many students experienced difficulties in translating practice concepts into action. We were particularly surprised about this because in teaching other courses, we had not been as aware of the gap between knowledge and application. As a matter of fact, those of us who had been teaching for a number of years had been fairly well satisfied with the level of knowledge and skills demonstrated by the majority of students in the program to this point. We were

also surprised by the extent to which students found it difficult to think like practitioners because this course came in their last semester before graduation. We were assuming a certain level of ability in applying knowledge that, when using this method of instruction, was not initially apparent to us to the extent we had expected or would like to have seen.

We were rather quickly able to assess "where students were" when we began the process of teaching and learning through decision cases. Through our weekly instructor debriefing and planning sessions, we discovered common concerns about student capabilities. We concluded that the following four areas needed particular emphasis throughout the semester: (1) encouraging systemic thinking; (2) moving from analysis to decision making; (3) defining problems clearly and concisely; and (4) directly linking interventions to problem definitions.

Encouraging Systemic Thinking. Students struggled with thinking systemically. Although our program uses ecosystems as its unifying theoretical perspective, we had to work very hard to help students think about cases in terms of the various systems involved, the relationships between and among systems, and the results of the interactions on varying system levels. Even when they were able to recognize some of the interrelationships among systems, they frequently were locked into dichotomous thinking of micro or macro, depending upon their chosen concentration. While instructors were initially surprised and concerned about students' lack of proficiency in thinking systemically, we were also very excited to see the progress that the students made in this area over the course of the semester. By repeatedly emphasizing the systemic nature of practice situations, the case discussions helped the students to finally understand and internalize the ecosystems perspective they had been encountering in all of their coursework to date.

Moving from Analysis to Decision Making. Instructors also were challenged to nudge students beyond the process of case analysis to actually identifying the problem(s) and deciding on an intervention. As students began to think more systemically, they became quite skilled at identifying all of the pieces of the given puzzle and how they fit together. It appeared that this was where many of them were comfortable staying. We also were aware that this was a comfort zone for most instructors, so in order to challenge students to move beyond analysis to making decisions (i.e., to defining the problem and selecting an intervention), we instructors needed to prod ourselves as well. This meant careful attention to pacing and timing to make sure that we did not attempt to move students prematurely but at the same time did not get mired in endless analysis. Some decision cases were particularly challenging in this regard because, like practice situations, the information they supplied was at points incomplete or uncertain. We were conscious of needing to move them, and us, on to the decision making step of problem solving which then presented yet another challenge.

Defining Problems Clearly and Concisely. Another practice skill that required particular attention was defining the problem. Again, we thought students would be much better able to clearly and concisely develop a problem statement emerging from problem analysis than they were because the teaching of this skill comes early in our program and is woven throughout the curriculum. We spent more time in class focusing on this aspect of practice than we had anticipated. Students

wrote problem statements in the weekly analyses of their cases and received feedback from instructors; we worked on formulating problem statements in class, and as a class, we developed criteria for critiquing problem statements and identifying "good" ones and students critiqued each other's statements in class. Again, it was exciting to see the learning that took place over the course of the semester as students developed their skills in clearly and concisely defining problems within a systems framework of analysis.

Directly Linking Interventions to Problem Statements. Instructors also noticed early in the course that students had the tendency to select favorite or familiar interventions. As a result, their interventions often demonstrated little or no connection with their problem statements. We worked on helping them more fully understand the concept of problem-intervention linkage, emphasizing that an intervention must be directly linked to the problem and should emerge from the problem as it is defined. We had the opportunity to work with them both in our case analyses in class and in giving feedback on their written case analyses. We challenged them to develop a rationale or justification for choosing the particular intervention that they did and to make that rationale explicit. We expected that they would be able to defend their choice of intervention by articulating the ways in which a specific intervention would solve a specific problem and how it was better than other alternatives. Through these various ways, students came to see more clearly the importance of explicitly and accurately linking the problem and the intervention.

Managing Uncertainty and Anxiety

This course represented an innovation within our curriculum in terms of both instructional content and process. Change naturally tends to be stressful in systems and this certainly proved to be true for both students and faculty as we implemented this innovation. As detailed below, in various ways we tried to recognize, acknowledge, and help students cope with stressors associated with this new course. Based on course feedback, these stressors primarily related to: (1) students' perceptions of an inordinate work load for the course and the explicit ways in which they were held accountable for producing the work expected of them; (2) the grading system used in relation to the work they produced; (3) and the challenges associated with learning and practicing new ways of thinking and acting.

Work Load and Accountability. Many students complained throughout the semester of what they considered to be an inordinate workload for this course compared to other courses in our program. In reality, the workload in relation to the nine weeks of decision cases consisted of reading a 4-10 page case each week and writing a 2-3 page case analysis. During the nine weeks spent on decision cases, there were no additional readings since the intent was to introduce no new content in this course but to allow students the opportunity to integrate and apply the content they had learned previously. Many students complained that writing weekly papers was excessive. Instructors believed that the weekly expectations in terms of work were equivalent to the reading expectations for other courses. For this reason we were initially surprised by the students' very evident distress related to work load. As instructors discussed this distress with students and among ourselves, some of us began to wonder whether students had been able to succeed

in their other courses without producing on a weekly basis (i.e., without doing the assigned readings each week) but by only producing for a periodic paper or exam requirement. In this course, students were held accountable by demonstrating weekly that they had done the work for that week through delivering a product in the form of a paper and their informed class participation. Some of the instructors raised this possible interpretation in class and received mixed responses. Some students acknowledged this to be true, while others did not think this to be an accurate interpretation of their experiences. Instructors gathered data from students regarding the amount of time they spent on the course in order to better gauge students' reactions to work load. Early in the semester, many students reported spending much more time than usual writing case analyses and preparing for case discussions but with experience they became more efficient. Overall, the time required seemed to faculty well within the amount of preparation time expected for a graduate level course. As a result, this experience raised questions about the adequacy of accountability in other courses that rely on a minimal number of exams and major written assignments.

Grading. Many students expressed much distress, and for some, anger related to grading in this course. Grading of the weekly case analyses presented a particular challenge for faculty as well. During our planning for the course we struggled with the issue of grading and ultimately decided that each of us would use our own method and criteria for grading. Some instructors used a case analysis matrix that provided descriptors for evaluating five dimensions of written case analyses: problem identification, analysis of issues, recommended plan, creative insight, and writing style (Morris, 1996). Other instructors used a satisfactory/unsatisfactory grading system for each weekly analysis, with specific criteria regarding what constituted each category. For example, one instructor defined "satisfactory" as "a thoughtful, informed, comprehensive, concise, and well-written analysis (limited to two pages) which clearly indicates that the student has read the case and is very familiar with its details and which addresses all six of the required components of the analysis."

Across all sections of this course, many students did not receive the kinds of grades on their case summaries they initially thought their work merited. Each week they were given specific feedback to help them improve for the following week. For many students, it was several weeks before they began to show improvement in their written work, but over the course of nine weeks, instructors noticed significant improvement in most students' work. Some students remained angry and anxious about the grades they received throughout the semester. Instructors anticipated that students might be upset about the differing approaches to grading across sections of the course, i.e., some instructors grading systems being seen as unfair compared to others, but this did not seem to be the source of the concern. Rather, when students did not do as well on their work as they expected, they thought instructors were grading too strictly and had unrealistic and unreasonably high expectations, regardless of the grading system and criteria being used. This dynamic, of course, tends to be present in academia (and elsewhere) but instructors were surprised and puzzled about the intensity of reaction in this course. As a bonus assignment, one instructor offered students the opportunity to rewrite their

initial case analysis at semester end, along with a comparison of the two analyses (Lundeberg & Fawver, 1994). Several of the students who did so expressed embarrassment upon reviewing their initial case analyses, and most were surprised and pleased by the substantial improvement in their ability to analyze cases.

Learning and Practicing New Ways of Thinking. In this course, students were clearly asked to learn and practice new ways of thinking as we attempted to help them move from the role of student to practitioner. We were also asking them to integrate and apply all of what they had learned in their MSW program. Certainly in other courses there had been attention to applying knowledge specific to each discrete course or content area, apparently to varying degrees, but integration and application were the central themes and purposes of this course. In this sense, we seemed to be asking students to "go where they had not gone before." As we engaged them in this process and as they got feedback on their work, students reported that they were beginning to question their readiness, confidence, and competence for practice.

In fact, case discussions deliberately undermine certainty by promoting more flexible and complex thinking, "including changing from dichotomous ways of thinking to the appreciation of more conditional ways of thinking" (Lundeberg & Fawver, 1994). Research on conceptual change may help explain learning from case discussions:

> Unless individuals become dissatisfied with existing beliefs and consider the utility of alternative or new beliefs, there may be no change in thinking. However, case discussions may provide the opportunity for participants to confront previously held beliefs and come to understand plausible alternative ideas, which might in turn be the catalyst for a shift in beliefs and understanding about particular issues in cases. (Levin, 1999, p. 146)

We think it possible that this dynamic, coupled with the timing of this course in the last semester of the program and coinciding with the job search process, resulted in a high level of anxiety among students.

We attempted to help students keep this in perspective by drawing on knowledge of the change process and of the dynamics involved in innovation. For example, Virginia Satir's model of change (Satir, Banmen, Gerber & Gomori, 1991) helped us to understand and manage this process. Change involves the interruption of the status quo by a foreign element (this course and the instructor) resulting in chaos. As the system attempts to cope with the chaos, new learnings result, which allows for movement to the practice and integration phase. In this phase of change, the system's chaos lessens as it practices and integrates these learnings. Moving through this phase of practice and integration leads the system to a new status quo, in this instance, emerging practitioners better equipped to begin MSW-level practice. This model proved very helpful in understanding and managing this innovation as we definitely saw all phases of the process in teaching this course.

We used the students' responses to this innovation to teach about change in systems. It was particularly interesting that one of the decision cases dealt with an innovation in an agency system, resulting in very similar dynamics to the ones we were experiencing in the course. This allowed for a rich discussion of the parallels

between the case and our experiences and for the opportunity to normalize feelings of anxiety associated with change.

Teaching this course was an innovation for instructors as well, so we experienced our own forms of anxiety, which resulted in new learnings for all of us to practice and integrate into our teaching. Particularly helpful in dealing with our own anxiety and stress relating to this innovation were our weekly instructors' meetings. We met each week to debrief the previous class with a particular focus on what worked and did not work in that week's case analysis. We developed teaching objectives for the upcoming decision case, wrote opening questions to start the case discussion, anticipated the possible course of the discussion, planned teaching techniques for adding variety (e.g., role plays, small group work), and designed strategies to address students' limitations and enhance their strengths.

These weekly meetings served as a much-needed source of support for those of us teaching the course. In addition to being a valuable stress management tool, these meetings allowed us the opportunity to experience firsthand many benefits of case method learning. Because cases cut across content areas, we relied on each other for content knowledge. Because we all had limited experience in case method teaching (and most of us had none), our weekly debriefing and planning meetings contributed to our learning about teaching, facilitated mutual problem-solving, supported experimentation, and increased collaboration and camaraderie.

Evaluating the Course and Student Learning

At risk of over-evaluating this new course, instructors sought both formative and summative evaluation data at multiple points during the semester. Given the orientation to active learning, several of these methods challenged students to reflect on their own and others' learning. In fact, as explained below, several instruments were selected or designed to promote changes in student thinking and understanding. As a result, these instruments served both as teaching aids and outcome measures.

Perhaps most significantly, students' written analyses and class discussion of decision cases provided surprising, even distressing feedback about their lack of readiness for professional practice. For example, early in the semester, capstone faculty realized that, at best, students had great difficulty formulating workable problems for the decision cases. Most students tended to formulate problems in superficial ways despite repeated exposure to problem-solving models throughout the curriculum. Few exhibited a systemic understanding of problems despite the fact that the master's curriculum is organized by an ecological systems perspective. In response to these apparent deficits, capstone faculty provided information about formulating problems and incorporating multiple system levels in these formulations. This information included reminders about previous readings, handouts on defining problems, written and oral feedback regarding written case analyses, and in-class problem-setting exercises.

In addition to evaluating individual student performance on each weekly case analysis, instructors used several additional methods for gauging student learn-

ing and soliciting feedback concerning the course. Because the data are reported in detail elsewhere (Wolfer & Miller-Cribbs, in preparation), the methods will only be summarized here. At the end of most case discussions, instructors asked students to write down what they had learned from the case discussion, an adaptation of the minute paper (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Several instructors collected these student "learnings," compiled an anonymous aggregate set of learnings, and e-mailed complete copies to members of the class section from which they came. Structuring this brief period for personal reflection encouraged students to actively identify and consolidate their own learning. Having students write down what they had learned also reinforced what might otherwise be ambiguous and potentially frustrating for some students. Sharing student learnings via e-mail further reinforced learning and broadened students' understanding of how differently people responded to a shared discussion. Students were often fascinated and sometimes surprised by what their peers reported learning.

At mid-semester and again at semester end, instructors administered a newly constructed learning outcomes instrument. Based on the case method and PBL literature, the instrument was designed to solicit student perceptions of correspondence between expected learning benefits of case method and PBL instruction and what they were learning. Except for a section on applying content knowledge from others courses, this instrument focused on developing "procedural" knowledge (e.g., "think across system levels," "explain and support my decisions"). In addition to gauging their own learning, the instrument was intended to remind students of what the course was meant to promote. In this way, it provided a subtle reframe for students, some of whom initially felt unclear about and frustrated with the rather process-oriented benefits of case method instruction.

Also at mid-semester, instructors administered a teaching improvement evaluation. Adapted from Weimer, Parrett, and Kerns (1988), this instrument asked students to rate their instructor's classroom methods and performance on a seven-point scale, ranging from one for "Instructor does very well" to seven for "Instructor needs to improve." The particular items were selected or created for relevance to case method teaching skills and attitudes (e.g., "Maintains a high level of safety and respect within the classroom, even when people disagree with each other," "Challenges vagueness in discussions"). Each item also provided space for students to suggest ways the instructor could improve his or her performance. The combined quantitative/qualitative items allowed instructors to obtain both summary judgements and detailed feedback about ways to improve. For instructors new to case method teaching, this instrument provided invaluable feedback. On some items, conflicting student responses gave instructors the opportunity to talk about what they were trying to accomplish and how these efforts elicited divergent reactions from students. Often, these discussions also helped students to gain a better understanding of the case method of instruction, to appreciate the complexity of the learning process, and to reconsider their own strong reactions to certain aspects of the process. Taken together, the learning outcomes measure and teaching improvement evaluation encouraged students to distinguish between what they were learning and how their instructor sought to promote learning, and to think about how these might be related.

Finally, capstone instructors administered a course-objectives measure and a new course-specific evaluation form. The latter asked what contributed or detracted most from students' learning and solicited their suggestions for improving the course, with special emphasis upon course assignments. Because these two instruments were administered at semester end, they could only provide summative data for fine-tuning future courses.

Overall, strong and fairly widespread negative sentiments at mid-semester were clearly reversed by semester end. The overwhelming majority of students expressed satisfaction with the capstone learning experience, with some citing it as the most significant and growth-inducing course in the MSW curriculum (Wolfer & Miller-Cribbs, in preparation).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our positive experience with the case method of instruction, we encourage its use in other schools of social work. We offer the following recommendations for social work faculty interested in adopting the case method of instruction in the way in which we are using it in our university.

Tangible Supports

Numerous tangible supports are needed to develop and implement this innovation. Faculty who are developing the course need support in the form of release time or overload pay for this purpose. We found that developing a course of this nature was far more labor-intensive than other course development in which we have been involved. For this reason, the administration should not assume that an already overworked and overloaded faculty will be able to add the responsibility for developing this course without adjustments in their existing work load. Faculty development funds for case method workshops, institutes, and/or consultation are useful in preparing them for the development and teaching of a course using this method of instruction. Because we recommend a maximum class size of 20 for a course of this nature, a commitment from the administration is needed to keep section sizes small. Administrative support is also needed to configure course scheduling in a way that allows for diverse representation of students in each class section from across the curriculum. This means that students representing all of the program's concentrations or specializations or fields of practice (however the curriculum is organized) should be included in each class section because this diversity substantially enriches case discussions. Classrooms that flexibly allow for face-to-face discussion in both small and large groups are needed (Erskine, Leenders & Mauffette-Leenders, 1998).

Committed Faculty Cohort

A committed cohort of faculty interested in developing and teaching a case-oriented course is critical. As mentioned above, faculty involved in our course met weekly during the semester in which the course was being developed and continued to meet weekly while it was taught. We believe this level of involvement was essential to the success of the course. The intermingled learning and support that flowed from these meetings helped us as faculty to deal constructively with our own uncertainty and anxiety resulting from substantial change, and thereby helped to prepare us to better lead students. When we reminded each other that "teachers also must learn" (Gragg, 1994), we meant not only content but process.

Multiple Feedback Loops

A commitment to evaluation using multiple feedback loops throughout a course using case-oriented instruction is important. Evaluation was an ongoing theme in our course experience. We incorporated a variety of feedback loops that included instructor discussions, student self-reflection, and classroom interaction in order to promote students' awareness about their own learning and assessment of their use of self in social work practice. We employed formative and summative evaluative tools, both oral and written, regarding students' experiences with the course process, our particular strengths and limitations in teaching the course, and learning outcomes. These feedback loops helped us to make mid-course corrections that enhanced the course (e.g., providing handouts and extra discussion on particular learning issues). In the process, we modeled for our students the routine inclusion of evaluation procedures in professional practice and promoted self-reflection among both faculty and students.

Managing Innovation

Explicit attention to managing the innovation is an important component of developing and implementing a case-oriented approach to teaching and learning. In addition to the needed tangible administrative supports and the intangible collaborative support of those teaching the course identified above, we found other aspects of managing the innovation to be important in the success of this course. Students need to be introduced and oriented to the method of case-oriented instruction as part of the course. They need to know the rationale for using this method of instruction and the ways in which it differs from more traditional learning, as well as its challenges and benefits. Faculty who teach an innovative course need to be reminded of the normal resistances and anxieties associated with significant change and encouraged to provide support to students and to each other when people experience discomfort as a result of the change process. There is the potential here for a good lesson for both students and faculty in learning to trust the process. Support from faculty (or at least the absence of resistance) who are not teaching the course is also important to managing this innovation. Therefore, the entire faculty needs to be oriented to case method instruction and its purposes. We experienced the ripple effect in our program during the implementation of this innovation. Faculty in other courses were dealing with "fall-out" in their classes in terms of students being distracted by their experiences in the new course. Some faculty responded in ways that supported the innovation, while others who were perhaps not as well briefed on this curriculum change, responded in ways that seemed to undermine the innovation. A "united front" is useful in managing the innovation and the chances for this occurring are increased when all faculty have sufficient information about the rationale and process for case-oriented instruction.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on our own informal observations, we believe the case method of instruction may be an effective vehicle for promoting and reinforcing critical thinking and problem-solving skills and for helping students to integrate and apply the knowledge, skills, and values to which they have been exposed over the course of their MSW education. And given its place in our curriculum, the case method appears

to facilitate students' role transition from that of student to practitioner. As a further benefit, we find our collaborative efforts in developing the capstone course and using the case method of instruction have energized and improved our teaching, both in this course and beyond.

Endnote

[1]A course syllabus, including course assignments, is available from the first author.

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