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Macro Community-Based Practice: Educating Through Community-Based Action Projects

Christina R. Miller and Adrian J. Archuletta

Abstract

Teaching undergraduate students the skills needed for macro community-based practice is often a daunting task. We introduce community-based action projects (CBAP) as a framework for teaching macro community-based work. CBAP integrates aspects of service-learning, action research, and core organizing principles from the Midwest Academy Manual for Community Organizing. We discuss course design, strengths and limitations, and provide an example of a CBAP.

Many helping professions that embrace community practice are grounded in the quest for social and economic justice by focusing on the interaction between people and their environment (Miller, Tice, & Hall, 2008). Helping professionals with this focus seek a thoughtful union between clients' experiences and broader social problems. Training in macro-level practice (e.g., advocacy, community engagement, community development, community organizing, or community-driven interventions) prepares helping professionals to engage their communities and develop their practice skills. Macro practice requires specific skills and experience. Therefore, an important goal of higher education should be to present students with opportunities for transformative education that leads to a new perception of themselves as engaged citizens. These newly transformed global citizens are energized to connect with and impact their communities through developed and refined macro practice skills. We explored the extent to which potentially transformative experiential learning practices can be used to teach macro practice skills to undergraduate social work students. The purpose of this article is to present an innovative approach to education that empowers them to connect with their communities around issues of mutual interest. We describe a framework for teaching macro practice skills through community-based action projects (CBAP) that creates the opportunity for students to grapple with the challenges of partnership and community collaboration. CBAPs are student driven, semester long experiences of community organizing and social action. We include the guiding framework for the CBAP, a description of assignments with learning outcomes and assessments of learning, as well as a discussion of the class elements that both helped or hindered student learning of macro skills. Although the examples are derived from social work, other helping professions with similar

educational practices and training approaches will find that the framework for integrating CBAPs is easily accomplished.

Current Macro Practice Education: Failures and Success

Experiential learning in helping and community-based professions is essential for helping students develop and refine practice skills. Although professions that recognize the interconnection of social problems from the individual to the broader community may find it challenging to prepare students at each level of practice (i.e., micro, mezzo, and macro), in social work, field placements are the primary vehicle for students to integrate their education with direct experience (Carey, 2007). Like many practice based professions, these placements or internships may occur in a variety of settings, including universities, community and government agencies, schools, and health and mental health facilities, as well as other organizations seeking to improve individual and community well-being (Boylan & Scott, 2009). However, experiential macro practice opportunities are rare (Koerin, Reeves, & Rosenbloom, 2000) limiting students' experiences in confronting larger social problems often rooted in social and economic injustice and disparities. Professions that attempt to be inclusive of all forms of practice may find that student preferences limit their competencies across various forms of practice. For example, many social work students focused on learning clinical practice become apathetic toward learning about social policy and broad social action (Carey, 2007; Rompf & Royce, 1994). Hymans (2000) described social work students' lack of interest in macro practice as a "general malaise." In fact, Hymans found that graduating bachelor level social work students placed macro practice as the least interesting social work subject in their exit interviews. Another study of graduating social

work seniors showed they ranked policy and macro practice courses as the “least valuable” of their educational experience (Sather, Weitz, & Carlson, 2007). While negative views of policy, macro practice, and research by students may be because they perceive these courses as unimportant, poor integration and fragmented instruction may also be the cause. Other helping professions with a similar framework for engaging individuals and communities may also find that instruction does not always result in direct experiences that help students develop skills and confidence in executing various forms of practice.

The potential disconnect between instruction and direct macro experience may lessen a professional’s willingness and confidence when confronted with social problems requiring action. Students with direct experiences with macro level practice report a greater sense of competence and are more likely to employ macro level interventions as professionals (Anderson & Harris, 2005; Keller, Whittaker, & Burke, 2001). Rocha (2000) found that students who had experiential learning opportunities felt more competent to do policy-related work and were able to apply their new skills. Therefore, students across helping professions that embrace various levels of practice (e.g., families and communities) should be provided with opportunities through classroom instruction to utilize macro skills (e.g., community organizing and community engagement) to ensure greater exposure to various levels of practice.

Pedagogy: Service-Learning, Community-Based Learning, and Action Research

A community-based learning approach is particularly timely due to the current trend in strengthening the university’s public engagement (Ishisaka, Farwell, Sohng, & Euhara, 2004). For example, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999) issued a report entitled, *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution*. Some helping profession educators are utilizing the campus community to engage students in social action that is relevant to their everyday lived experience (Carey, 2007). Projects of this nature are grounded in the idea that the social problem addressed in the classroom experience must be one that “students believe to be a personal cause, which impacts on their community and lives” (Carey, 2007, p. 68). This notion may gain student support within the short time frame of an academic semester; however, it fails to expand the student’s perspective to embrace causes that

impact the most vulnerable populations.

Several models for integrating classroom instruction with community action and engagement exist. For example, University of Washington School of Social Work utilizes a Partnership for Integrated Community-Based Learning approach that relocates aspects of teaching and learning from academic to community settings (Ishisaka, Farwell, Sohng, & Ushara, 2004). The partnership included 11 faculty, 3 auxiliary faculty, 3 doctoral students, 2 executive directors, 7 program coordinators from 9 agencies, and 5 local community program and fund development consultants. The University of Nebraska Omaha utilizes a similar method for teaching macro level skills by incorporating a service-learning approach in two junior level policy courses, a senior macro practice course, and a senior level research methods course (Sather, Weitz, & Carlson, 2007). Their method for engaging bachelor level social work students in community-based instruction via service-learning also relied heavily on the faculty organization and implementation. Faculty met with agencies to select an appropriate community partner, worked with the agency administration and staff to develop specific projects and task groups, and assigned students to specific projects based on student requests, strengths, and learning needs.

Although these models are well organized and may contribute meaningfully to students’ experiences, these approaches may hinder students’ commitment to addressing particular social problems facing that community because they were not involved in the development of the community partnership or problem formulation. Community organizing emphasizes the importance of direct relationship development as the crux for building social power and individual empowerment to evoke organizational and community change and sustain long-term community partnerships (Speer & Hughey, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000). The initial work of engagement, consensus building, and relationship development, though challenging and time consuming to navigate, is the key to creating a successful community-based macro intervention (Speer & Hughey, 1995). In the context of service-learning, Des Marais, Yang, and Farzanehkhia (2000) argue that mistakes and corrective action are an inherent part of incorporating decision-making into leadership development. This approach allows students to connect the responsibilities of decision-making with real world consequences, but occurs in an environment (e.g., classroom) where the ultimate consequences may be lower with balanced

supervision and appropriate intervention. Excluding students from the initial steps of partnership models may hinder them from developing skills related to macro practice decision-making, community engagement, establishing interorganizational networks, and additional precepts required for macro work. Moreover, excluding students from the early work of partnership development risks mystifying the steps required to initiate macro interventions, further discouraging students' willingness to address existing social problems. The following describes an alternative model in macro social work practice courses that provides students with the opportunity to build macro skills in the initial stages of community engagement and action and how it aligns with the standards of a profession committed to community engagement and action.

The CBAP Model

The CBAP model was created when the two authors were each assigned to teach a section of undergraduate Generalist Social Work Practice II (Macro Social Work Practice) at the University of Louisville. Each class had approximately 20 students and met twice a week. The purpose of this project was to create a transformative learning experience for students to connect with the local community through applied action oriented work. Our goal was to guide students through the process of community engagement and change effort planning. Teaching a practice class within the required course sequence of a professional program creates a stronger impetus to provide applied learning experiences. We were committed to ensuring our students were building their community practice skills by practicing the work of engagement. It was important that students encountered the barriers and employ macro-problem solving skills through the often daunting phase of relationship building with community groups to develop trust and gain commitment. The focus on community connection through student initiated engagement efforts is a unique feature in the CBAP model. Allowing students to wrestle with the challenging and often cumbersome initial phases of community-engaged work opened them up for a richer, more intense learning experience. Practicing the actual tasks and activities they will engage in as professionals helps students begin to identify themselves as professionals and empowers them to make an impact in the broader community.

Our role as instructors was to provide structured facilitation of the process. We provided

brief lectures and then worked individually with student groups to support their progression through the model. We followed a student-initiated or student-directed learning process and gave students the power to make decisions around the implementation of their CBAP. We realized that one school semester is too short a time frame to initiate sustained large scale community change; however, it is enough time to build a partnership based on mutual interest and implement a small scale project or initiative.

While planning the structure of the course and outlining the CBAP model, we consulted the university Center for Civic Education and Service-Learning and utilized their existing resources (e.g., current list of community agencies, reflection activities, and instructional sheets outlining professional behavior), but their strong focus on service-learning did not incorporate the action mechanisms (e.g., to problem identification and initiating community outreach) necessary for a more grassroots form of community engagement lacking in other models.

By requiring students to identify their own social problem and agencies to work with, we hoped to increase their personal connection to the macro project and empower them to address social problems in their communities. Although all projects were student generated, instructors provided final approval for all projects to ensure they were action-oriented and met the model specification outlined below.

Course Design

We were deliberate at each step to ensure the various components of the model came together cohesively and provided students with an opportunity to develop foundational skills related to community engagement and action. Therefore, each step of the model and the parameters to maximize group efficiency enhance group dynamics and solidify students' commitment to the project were taken into account. Although the project is separated into stages, each stage may require additional development and exploration despite beginning the next stage in the CBAP process. Each step does build and enhance the completion of the others but should not be viewed as a static event or set of activities that require absolute resolution before the project can progress. Table 1 provides the framework indicating how an action-based project can be integrated into instruction to meet the specific macro skills. We will describe each element of the framework

(column 1), the graded assignments connected to the elements of the framework (column 2), and the macro skills learned through each assignment (column 3).

The CBAP course design was implemented in an undergraduate generalist social work practice with groups and communities class. Students were all juniors and seniors in the semester before their block field placements. Prerequisites for the course include research, generalist practice with individuals, families, and groups.

Formation of small groups. The first element of the framework involves students forming small groups around a vulnerable population of interest and perceived social problem. In the class, students divided into small groups of five to seven, which was consistent with task group sizes intended to maximize performance and balance the work associated with the project. Rather than identify specific problems for students to address, we believed students would be more committed to the project if they organized themselves

Table 1. Framework and Course Design

CBAP Framework	CBAP Project-Graded Assignments	Macro Practice Skill
STAGE 1:		
Group formation/social problem identification	Paragraph listing members of their group and the social problem of interest Group paper including a definition of and literature review about the systematic causes of their social problem	Problem identification Group formation Identification of systematic causes of social problems Utilize existing empirical evidence as the foundation for understanding the social problem
STAGE 2:		
CBAP Framework	CBAP Project	Macro Practice Skill
Identify various agencies and community members who are knowledgeable about their social problem of interest	Submit a list of community contacts (i.e., those individuals known to have an interest in working with those affected by, or agencies directly involved in, the amelioration of the social problem)	Resources identification/development Social networking
STAGE 3:		
Face to face meetings with community contacts	Submit a list of community contacts and description of what they learned	Social networking Partnership building Needs assessment regarding problem
STAGE 4:		
Issues	Group paper identifies five systematic causes of social problem and a strategy for addressing each cause that emerges from face-to-face meetings.	Partnership building and project development
Strategies/Interventions	Groups identified the strategy they planned to implement in collaboration with community partners. Paper also included a timeline for the intervention and a detailed plan for their project, including the tasks and responsibilities of each group member and the community partner(s). The paper concluded with an evaluation plan.	Brainstorming and critical thinking skills
Central Issue: Targets, Allies & Constituents, Opponents Strategy	Reflection assignment	Group building/cohesion; resource identification; networking; planning; assessment of community; assessment of strategy efficacy in addressing social and economic justice; help establish sense of community by developing interagency and community collaboration
Tactics		Must identify sources that maintain oppressive conditions (e.g. agency policies); critical thinking to identify most effective tactics to initiate and sustain social change; delegate task to accomplish cohesive goals; develop collaborative relationships that build community power
Action Plan		Develop abilities to execute a multistage and collaborative strategy; develop and manage time sensitive tasks; Occupy leadership roles that delegate responsibility; Develop and employ organizing framework for accomplishing tasks at each stage
Evaluation		Project evaluation; encourages students to tie strategies to measurable outcomes to evaluate change
STAGE 5:		
Project Implementation	Students spend significant time working with community members to implement the change project they proposed (not graded—see p. 24 for more discussion)	Direct application of developed plan; continuous assessment of progress and change
STAGE 6:		
Social Change	Final paper evaluating their completed project; professional presentation about social problem; project implementation	Project evaluation

around a central social problem. This level of engagement is essential as students' involvement inside and outside the classroom facilitates critical thinking and enhances potential information and skill retention (Bransford, 1979; Garside, 1996). Examples of broad social problems identified by our students were homelessness, early childhood literacy, adolescent substance abuse, school drop-outs, childhood obesity for at-risk youth, veterans' reintegration into academic institutions, educational needs for migrant children, and social stigma related to aging populations.

Students submitted a brief paragraph listing members in their group and the identified social problem. The groups reviewed the assignments they would be responsible for over the course of the semester and were asked to consider how their group might function (e.g., leadership in the group and decision-making). Additionally, groups discussed procedures for facilitating assignment completion (e.g., editing, fact-checking), and how group members could utilize their individual skills as resources for the group. Such activities allowed students to thoughtfully consider how task groups and their functions and procedures are integral to initiating community engagement and action.

Defining the social problem. Students must understand the breadth of the social problem and the structural and contextual factors contributing to the conditions and experiences of vulnerable populations. In the initial brainstorming exercise, the small groups were asked to identify factors contributing to the social problem affecting a vulnerable population. Utilizing the ecological model of practice (Meyer, 1993; Hepworth & Larsen, 1993; Compton & Galaway, 1989) is helpful in conceptualizing the historical, cultural, environmental, structural, and individual level factors that influence a social problem and impede individuals and communities' abilities to adapt. Utilizing this model allows students to think holistically about the social problem by recognizing the interconnection of social factors related to the problems affecting populations and communities.

Following initial brainstorming sessions, the small groups prepared a research paper about their social problem. Students referenced professional journals, community members, and social agency professionals to conceptualize the social problem. The paper included a broad discussion of the social problem at the national level and then narrowed in focus to present state and community information. The students operationally defined their social

problem, its impact on the local community, and what the community is doing to remedy the problem. For instance, one group identified high school retention as the social problem, provided the local drop-out statistics, and highlighted four agencies working on the issue of high school retention. Conceptualizing the social problem in this fashion serves several purposes. First, it allows students to become familiar with existing research on the topic so that they understand the arguments and empirical evidence in the literature. Second, it allows students to develop a knowledge-base and compare descriptions and evidence from research in other geographic regions or at the national level to descriptions of the social problem in their own communities. Third, it prepares them to discuss the social problem knowledgeably with community members to engage them in a thoughtful discourse of the social problems emerging in the community.

Developing community partnerships. In the next element of the framework, students identify various agencies and community members knowledgeable about their selected social problem. The small groups identify local community agencies and other key stakeholders that work toward ameliorating the social problem, or those directly or indirectly affected by the social problem. The students contact these individuals and request face-to-face meetings. Students submitted a list of community contacts and what they learned from their face-to-face meetings.

These meetings have several intended purposes. The first is to determine the extent to which the information obtained through their research and conceptualization of the social problem directly relates to the experiences, concerns, and needs of those in the community. Second, it allows students to directly gather information from community members regarding the problems and allows them to build relationships with community members. Students are encouraged to ask their community contacts for additional contacts in the community to saturate their understanding of the social problem while recruiting additional support to enact the social change strategy. Lastly, it provides students an opportunity to utilize their existing contact to identify other key stakeholders in the community who can provide useful information, identify additional resources, and provide support for their projects. Many parts of this process mirror the Ross house-meeting model emphasizing the development of a social network, drawing communities into discourse about social problems, and organizing communities toward

action (Brueggemann, 2006).

The students were required to make at least three community contacts for their initial contact assignment and expand this list as their face-to-face meeting identified additional individuals of interest. Students were strongly encouraged to diversify their community contacts (e.g., those experiencing the problem directly, social service agencies, community leaders, educational institutions and other religious, cultural, social, and governmental organizations) to obtain a well-rounded view of the social problem. One group had tremendous success at this process and made over 30 contacts and received some form of support or assistance from most sources contacted. The groups were encouraged to develop a relationship with their contacts through continued phone, email, and face-to-face interactions throughout the semester. Maintaining contact and continuously receiving feedback from community members was instrumental in implementing a strategy toward change.

Choosing an issue and strategy. The next piece of the framework involves issue and strategy identification. The goals of the face-to-face meetings are to build community partnerships, learn the community level issues related to their social problem of interest, and the community member's ideas regarding strategies or interventions to remedy the community level need. Then groups identify their primary issue and the strategy they will implement as a group. At this stage, students work in their groups to compile and assess the information they have obtained from community members. The goal is to identify an issue and strategy that cuts across all of the individuals interviewed to unite community members. As many of the stages discussed, this is an iterative process that requires continuous feedback and discussion with community members. It has been our experience that despite busy schedules, community members have been more than willing to contribute to the strategies and address social problems with students. However, it should be noted that we make great efforts to ensure that students are perceived as professionals by emphasizing skills (i.e., preparation, timeliness, appearance) that denote professionalism and preparing them for some of the resistance they may receive as students. For example, in some instances, key stakeholders could not be engaged in these discussions (e.g., youth) because of their vulnerability and requests by community organizations that could not be met given limited

resources (e.g., criminal background checks).

Students identify their targets, allies, and constituents, as well as opponents as part of the implementation strategy. Targets are the people or groups they are hoping to change; allies and constituents are those who will help them bring about change; and the opponents are those who will hinder the change process (Pincus & Minahan, 1973). Groups develop an action plan, implementation timeline, and a plan for evaluating the outcome of their CBAP. A large group paper, including a list of five systemic causes and potential strategies for each one and the specific strategy they selected to implement, was submitted to fulfill the above aspects of the course framework. The group paper also included a timeline for the intervention and a detailed plan for their community project, including each group member's and community contact's tasks and responsibilities. The group's timeline had many of the same structural elements as a program evaluation and review technique (PERT) chart (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004). The paper concluded with a plan for evaluating their community action project.

The final element of the CBAP framework is the experience of social change. Students submitted a final paper evaluating their completed projects and gave 15-minute professional presentations about their social problem and their experience connecting with the community and implementing their intervention. Community members were invited to attend. Grades for the final paper were assessed on the thoroughness of the evaluation and not on the success of the intervention project given that social change often takes time to unfold. Because groups worked in concert with community members, often to address an existing deficiency between agencies, it was not unusual for agencies to continue working on or utilizing the solution developed with the students.

CBAP in Action

The following is a description of a CBAP from one of our small groups. The project did not perfectly align with the framework and we will identify how this may have hindered the project's success and how these issues can be remedied in the future. We present this as a realistic example in its true form, which includes strengths such as great teamwork and organization and flaws, such as poor relationship sustainment with community contacts. The small group, Adolescent Empowerment Group (AEG), formed around wanting to help adolescents. Their community

contacts included a high school guidance counselor, a social worker from a program serving adolescent girls, the director of an after school program, a worker in a youth services program, a school teacher, and the director of a boys choir that focuses on youth mentorship. Creating a partnership with adolescents through the various community agencies the group identified was not an option due to the necessary safety precautions of background screening required by the agencies. After meeting with their community contacts, the students learned that a common concern was high school retention. Their community contacts voiced that adolescents need good mentorship starting in middle school. Their group paper included a variety of issues and strategies shared by the community members; however, not all the community members offered a strategy, and the group used research literature and personal creativity to develop two of their strategies. They identified a need for mentorship as their central issue and partnered with the boys choir to implement their project. The group described the choir's success at helping adolescent boys. The choir is comprised of urban minority youth and currently has a 100% high school graduation and college entrance rate. AEG's strategy was to increase the enrollment of adolescent boys in the choir.

Their action plan was to present information about the choir to the community members who work with at-risk adolescent boys, school principals, and school counselors. They determined the best tactic for presenting information about high school retention and the choir was to create a brochure for the targets listed above. Unfortunately, the group did not partner with their community groups to develop this strategy, but instead used information gathered from the community groups for strategy selection and development. The instructor encouraged the group to persist in nurturing their relationships with community partners throughout the strategy selection and development phase. Student groups were given guidelines, suggestions, and advice; however, they were also given autonomy in decision-making. We view this autonomy as a key strength of the process. Though autonomous student groups may make poor choices that negatively impact their final product, they learn valuable lessons about process that may not be learned if we structured the projects for them and removed them from the relationship development process.

Their timeline indicated when each task was

to be completed; however, they did not assign specific tasks to individual group members. This lack of specificity was evident in the papers of other groups as well. This led to confusion over group member responsibilities and some group members feeling responsible for more than their share of the work. AEG worked together to collect the needed information for their brochures, design the layout of the brochure, and have them printed. They contacted all of their targets and planned the best brochure delivery method (i.e., email, in person, or postal system). AEG did an excellent job of learning about issues and strategies from their community partners; however, they did not maintain a continuous relationship with the boys choir director throughout the project implementation. This limited the experience of working with a community group to implement a social change strategy. This lack of relationship development may have caused the students to miss ideas presented by the director of the choir. Students were encouraged to continue cultivating relationships with community partners throughout the semester by speaking with other boys choir leaders, parents, and participants to learn effective strategies for meeting their immediate goal of increased enrollment. However, as stated earlier, the instructors valued promoting the autonomy of the groups to implement the projects.

Among the lessons learned from the project was that partnership building needed to be emphasized. Students should follow up their initial meetings with thank-you cards, phone calls, or emails and then develop a specific strategy for maintaining existing contact with the community partner throughout the semester to convey the progress of the project and incorporate their feedback when barriers are encountered. Students were urged to stay in touch with their community contacts. Those groups that developed and maintained these relationships appeared to have a higher rate of completion compared to other groups. One strategy that may be useful for building and maintaining relationships with community partners is having each group member take responsibility for initiating at least two contacts per week. This will help ensure the projects are implemented in concert with the community partner and not done for the partner.

Successful Instructional Components

The structure of the course included mini-lectures covering a new aspect of macro practice and community-based work followed by group work time. The instructors met with each small

group and facilitated a time of reflection regarding the project. Students were encouraged to use their cell phones and laptops to facilitate community connections during this time. The group class time also allowed the instructor to provide more individualized time to assist groups in deconstructing their social problem, brainstorming, thinking through specific situations related to their project, and debriefing other group members on the progress made through completed tasks.

We identified three key elements of our course that appeared to help the students connect with their community action project and master the course objectives. The first is modeling macro practice skills; the second is allowing class time for group work; and the third is using special speakers from community organizations.

We modeled macro practice skills through our work with the student groups. We viewed the class as a microcosm of the CBAP the students were implementing. This was operationalized through dividing the students into task groups, raising their consciousness of social problems, and teaching and practicing macro skills before engaging with the community. At the beginning of the semester, the consensus from the students was that this project is too big for them. They often said things like “we’re just students.” We had to model the macro practice skills of empowerment and community organizing. We needed to show our students that they can make a meaningful difference in the community. We also had the responsibility to “sell” macro practice to them. As mentioned earlier, social work students have a greater understanding of and appreciation for direct practice. When engaging in community organizing, one often has to convince the stakeholders of the importance of the situation and how they can be change agents within their communities. We had to model this skill for our students in order to convince them to connect with the community-based action projects. By the middle of the semester, the students seemed to buy-in to the class and believe in the importance of macro social work practice. Many of the groups expressed a desire to contribute something positive to the community and felt passionate about the topics they had selected.

Allowing class time to work on the projects was an integral part of the course design. One of the major hurdles for group projects is finding a time to meet outside of class. Students are increasingly working full- or part-time and taking full loads of classes in addition to family responsibilities. We also worked to maintain accessible office hours and

be available by phone and email. The typical class involved 45 minutes of lecture and thirty minutes of group work time. Groups were allowed to schedule face-to-face community contact meetings during class time provided they gave the instructor prior notice and obtained the lecture materials from a classmate. Groups were encouraged to bring their laptops and cell phones to class and utilize that time for making community connections.

We brought in a variety of special speakers throughout the semester in an effort to show the students a variety of careers in macro social work. The speakers included the state National Association of Social Work lobbyist, a representative from the housing authority, and a policy analyst from the state office of program policy analysis and government accountability. Students appreciated the opportunity to meet professionals in macro social work careers and learn the specific requirements (i.e., bachelor of social work vs. master of social work or specific classes to extend one’s knowledge base) to do the job. These interactions with macro social work professionals also provided the opportunity to make professional connections during class, which assisted some groups that encountered problems implementing their projects.

Barriers to Instruction

We have identified three key elements of our course that have impaired the students’ connection with their community action project as well as their mastery of course objectives. The first is group dynamics and cohesion, the second was weak community connections, and the third element was our use of a traditional lecture format with textbook for dispensing information.

Small group cohesion directly impacted the group’s motivation to engage in the project and their ability to work together. The social work program within our university is large and many of the students did not know each other at the beginning of class. They were forced to form small groups within two weeks of starting the CBAP course. Some groups quickly formed a friendly working relationship; other groups could work well together; and other groups never developed a good working relationship. One of the instructors allowed two of his groups to be smaller than the other groups and this created tension from excessive workload for the group, particularly in instances where all members did not equally contribute to the project. The other instructor strongly encouraged one of the groups to define

their social problem more narrowly so they would all be working on the same problem. To remedy the lack of group cohesion, we recommend engaging the class in trust building activities early in the semester. The first, second, and third class meetings should have several group bonding exercises. These will also provide practical tools the students can use in their future social work practice with groups. These activities should then be sprinkled throughout the semester.

The students did not develop strong and meaningful relationships with community agencies. Some of the groups took too long to make their initial contacts, while others were not assertive in their requests to meet with people working within agencies. For example, if an email went unanswered or a phone call unreturned they did not do a follow-up. Once the initial contact was made, students did not work to maintain the relationship with that community partner. An initial list of community contacts was required as a graded assignment; however, we did not grade the ongoing efforts of relationship sustaining through continued contact with community partners. Students tend to associate the level of importance of various activities with the number of points the activity is worth. As newcomers to the community, our own lack of community connections may have been a hindrance to our students' ability to build relationships with community members for a class project; however, our intention was for students to have an authentic community engagement experience that was not pre-planned by the instructor. We wanted to provide students with an experience that paralleled an actual grassroots organizing effort that requires the implementation of critical thinking and macro problem-solving skills to address the unexpected difficulties associated with problem identification and conceptualization, community partnership development, and project implementation. Because relationship building is essential to individual empowerment and social power needed to produce change (Speer & Hughey, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000), iterative efforts at relationship development and community engagement with faculty guidance were essential to emulating an actual community action experience. Although a general framework was utilized to guide students, each group project required students to adapt the model to their identified problem as well as any conclusions drawn from the barriers they encountered. In addition, students were encouraged to utilize service-learning resources

(e.g., a leadership and civic participation center) on campus, which had an established history with several social service agencies that participated in student-led projects. Additionally, we thought we had provided the students with adequate opportunity to create community partnerships by encouraging them to bring their laptops and cell phones to class. We wanted them to use class time to start building these connections. We found that students were not willing to contact agencies during class. Students are strongly discouraged from using technology in most classes, and it must have felt unusual to have a teacher encourage cell phone use during class. We also had a lecture that outlined how to make a professional phone call, email, and letter. We recommend creating class activities where groups compose a phone script, email, and letter to their community connection. The groups will then present their work to the class for critique. After appropriate edits have been made, the groups will make their initial community contact in class. We also needed to teach the students more strategies for connecting with people who do not return emails or phone calls. Students need to know to use phone calls if emails do not work and drop by the office if other efforts have not been successful. Persistence in obtaining resources is a vital skill for any social worker. The students' status as undergraduates who are typically in their early 20s and lack professional work experience may have also contributed to their unwillingness to be more assertive in making community connections. Additionally, the short time-frame of a semester creates a challenge in developing a meaningful relationship with community partners and implementing broad community change. We shared with our students that their role was to work with their community partners to start the change process and/or carve out a small aspect of the change process that they could accomplish within a 16-week semester. The AEG group elected to contribute a small deliverable, the brochure, to their community partners as part of the broader project of increasing enrollment in the boys choir. Another group started the process of program evaluation for a collection of early childhood literacy programs in the community by connecting those programs with university's center for educational evaluation. They were not able to see the final product of their work, but they were successful in bringing resources to the literacy programs.

Using traditional teaching methods such as a text book and daily lecture hindered the energy

level of the course and connection with the project. We recommend creating mini lectures and class activities that engage the students in practicing a specific skill they will use in the implementation of their project. We also suggest personalizing the concept of community organizing and macro work by following a local issue as a class. Have each small group take responsibility for presenting a topic related to community organizing or macro social work. This will help the students practice the skills involved in presenting, engaging a group, and disseminating information.

Lessons Learned from Implementing a CBAP Practice Course

We learned several lessons through this initial CBAP practice course. First, students' motivation may be improved by having them present their progress to the class or utilizing role-plays to increase confidence. Second, macro practice models will help students connect class instruction with their direct experiences. Third, the scheduled class time affects the momentum of class instruction because students in later classes may be unable to contact community members after class. Fourth, groups with less than four members reported difficulties balancing the project workload. Fifth, allowing students to utilize phones and computers during class to contact community members helps create a flexible workspace that enhances participation, but may be difficult to implement for students. Sixth, each step of the CBAP model including relationship sustainment efforts, needs to be connected to a graded assignment or deliverable for students. Sixth, conventional pedagogical approaches (i.e., lecture) often conflicted with CBAP's experiential approach, which perhaps requires nonconventional methods of instruction.

Conclusion

The CBAP framework for teaching macro social work practice holds promise as a method for engaging students in community organizing and social action through an experiential based learning approach. Social work students are often focused on learning clinical skills at the expense of macro practice skills. We believe the CBAP framework can mitigate the apathy toward macro practice expressed by many social work students. By giving students the freedom to select their own social problem and community partner, we increase their engagement in social action. Through the CBAP students learn conceptualizing and understanding structural issues related to social problems, building and

maintaining community partnerships, facilitating thoughtful discussions with community partners around social problems, and employing a decision making model to identify and develop their social action strategy, as well as skills for evaluating the strategy. Successful instructional components for enhancing the learning environment include emphasizing group solidarity, developing strategies for community partnership maintenance, providing class time for group meetings and community connections, and utilizing semi-structured lectures with opportunities for practicing skills.

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