Teaching Research Methods to Social Work Students: A Transnational Critical Reflection

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Research assistant Ms Aileen Sorohan developing the online Teaching and Doing Research Survey
Today’s Presentation

- Background and Context
- Why is this Topic Important?
- Teaching Research Methods – Issues and Dilemmas
- What Does the Literature Say?
- The Study
- What did we Learn?
Background and Context

- Professor Ilango was a Cairns Institute Visiting Scholar at James Cook University (JCU) in 2012
- Dr Harris has taught research methods at JCU for 20 years
- They shared a mutual interest in teaching research methods to social work students
- Recognised that many challenges and dilemmas were relevant in both the Indian and Australian contexts and that a meaningful cross-national collaboration would potentially enrich the research learning experience of students in both locations
Further, Dr Desley Harvey, Senior Research Fellow with Queensland Health, recently contacted Dr Harris to discuss the possibilities of a collaboration around student perceptions of research.

Dr Harvey was interested in obtaining information about student understanding of research, new practitioner readiness for research and student perceptions of the role of research in practice.

Valued the opportunity this research presents for greater collaboration between sectors (health and education as an example) as a way of building an evidence base for social work.


By Desley Harvey, David Plummer, Alison Pighills & Tilley Pain
Why is this Topic Important?*

- The real purpose of research in social work as an evidence-base for policy and practice decisions begins to dawn in the minds of social workers after some experience in the field and after acquiring a broader and more inclusive world-view and understanding of the inter-connectedness of everything we do with some form of research activity, however rudimentary that might be.

- Unlike teaching social work methods, teaching of research methodology to social work students has been rather difficult and challenging because of the apprehensions in the minds of both the teacher and the taught.

* Reflections from Professor Ilango
Social Work Practice Standards

- The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Practice Standards particularly address the need for research:

Research is key to the continued development of the theory and knowledge base of social work practice. Research is a key area of social work practice and is one of the six objectives included in the AASW Practice Standards for Social Workers which identifies that “client needs, organizational goals and social policy are addressed through the application of the social worker’s values, knowledge and skills in the research process” (AASW, 2010, p. 6).
Teaching Research Methods – Issues and Dilemmas

- A pronounced separation of teaching and research in Indian Higher Education. Cutting edge and world class research does take place in Indian research institutions as well as the central universities and is supported centrally by the government. It also happens in the university departments of some state universities (where graduate students have historically been taught), but the research process is far removed from the teaching of undergraduates...

- In Australia research methods are a mandatory part of the social work curriculum and many students approach their research subjects with trepidation and reluctance (Fook, 2003; Harder, 2012). Harvey, Plummer, Pighills and Pain (2013) in their recent study supported this assertion and “identified research anxiety and research avoidance as significant challenges for research capacity building”.
What Does the Literature Say?

- **Research and Social Work**
  - “Practitioner research is potentially the most useful and relevant source of **new knowledge** for social work and service innovations” (Harvey, Plummer, Pighills and Pain, 2013, p. 2).
  - Respondents in Beddoe’s (2011) qualitative study indicated that they saw the **importance of research** informed practice, but they lacked confidence in undertaking research themselves – vital to the ongoing **professionalisation of social work**.
  - Srinivasa Murthy (2011) specifically acknowledges the contribution of research to our understanding of mental disorders and notes that: ‘This new knowledge has continuously supported the development of mental health programs’ (p. 104).
  - In the health sector – “Given the rise of evidence based practice, there are potentially serious implications for social work in terms of **how it positions itself as a contributor to new knowledge within health**” (Brough, Wagner & Farrell, 2013, p. 1).

- **Measuring Good Teaching Practice (literature examples)**
  - Measuring Student’s Perceptions of Teaching: Dimensions of Evaluation (1986), Burdsell and Bardo;
  - Conceptualising and measuring student engagement through the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE): a critique (2011) Hagel, Carr & Devlin;
  - Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education By Chickering and Gamson
The Study

• **Title:** Teaching Research Methods to Social Work Students

• **Aims:**
  ◦ To gather data from social work students in Australia and India in order to seek students' reflections on the experience of studying research, how prepared they feel they are to be practitioner researchers.
  ◦ To ascertain students’ views on how the teaching process may be improved.
  ◦ To use the research data to inform the development of strategies for improving the quality of research methodology teaching and learning, and enhancing readiness for practice based research.
Methodology

This research project used a quantitative methodology and data was gathered by questionnaire. The questionnaire was created online* using SurveyGizmo and included questions on social work students’ experiences of studying research methods, readiness to use research in practice and their recommendations on how the teaching of research methods could be improved.

THE SURVEY
Teaching and Doing Research

Teaching & Doing Research Survey

3. Please tell us whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. Use the scale provided (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree) and choose one answer for each statement.

Teaching staff encouraged students to voice any concerns they might have.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
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Teaching staff encouraged contact with students during their office consultation times.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
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Teaching staff were accessible to students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
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What did we Learn?

- **Population:** 80 final year BSW and MSW students from JCU, Australia
- **Sample:** 15 (18.75%) as at 1/11/13
- **Gender:** Female 13, Male 2
- **Age Range:** 22-56, Mean = 31.46
- **Study Mode:** External 53%, Internal 47%
- **Studied more than one research subject:** 96%
Research Confidence Level

- **Highest Confidence Levels:**
  - Finding relevant literature
  - Writing a research proposal
  - Formulating a research question
  - Use of qualitative methods
  - Writing a research report
Research Confidence Level

- **Lowest Confidence Levels:**
  - Applying for research funding
  - Use of quantitative methods
  - Interpreting quantitative results
Tell us how you believe you will be able to use the research skills that you have learned during your time at university when you are in professional practice

- **Quotes from students:**
  - Gathering information on cases and presenting it to colleagues.
  - Identify gaps in service provision.
  - I was asked by the CEO of my organisation to analyse data and put together graphs based on the data, and I was able to do so!
  - A baseline ability to develop.
  - In all fields of social work research is required.
  - I would use research skills to: understand prevailing ideology; service user perspectives; to help develop strategies to respond to service user needs more effectively; learn from others experiences; minimize errors of personal experience and advance professional knowledge to suit the changing context of practice.
  - I would like to conduct more research in my work to show it's efficacy and look forward to doing this in the future now that I have the knowledge and confidence to do it.
The following teaching skills were most valued*

- Availability of the lecturer to answer questions
- Classes were well organised and lecturer well prepared
- Enthusiastic staff
- Staff were accessible, helpful and caring
- Linking learning to previously learned skills and expanding on them
- Real examples to back up theory

*from quantitative and qualitative data
Final thoughts

- The very beginning of this research investigation – with much promise as it expands internationally (the challenges of international research collaborations)
- The Social Work Degree can offer a sound basis for research skill development (high confidence levels across a range of research skills)
- Students can articulate how research can be part of their future practice
- Students can identify teaching practices that make a difference to their research learning
- Accessible, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and well organised research teachers make a difference!