The Intersection of Social Work and Theatre

Standardized clients in the classroom
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Our history

- Role plays had been used to facilitate integration of theory with practice
- Observed limitations of student to student role plays
- Hoped for a more realistic interview situation
- Approached David in 2007
- Initially was a one session in class interview
- Evolved to three sessions
- Secured IRB approval to study the effectiveness of this teaching methodology
Previous research – use of role plays

- Role plays used to enhance student skill development (Doelker & Bedics, 1987; Petracchi, 1999; Petracchi & Collins, 2006)
- Role plays found effective in helping students integrate theory with practice (Carillo & Thyer, 1994)
Previous research – use of actors and theatre students

- Trained actors found helpful in assisting medical students with communication skills (Finley, Stott, & Kinersley, 1995)

- Theatre students acted as clients for MSW final exams (Petracchi, 1999)

- MSW and BSW students have reported a strong interest in having theatre students act as clients because of the “real life feel” (Petracchi & Collins, 2006; Dennison, 2011)
This study

• Three foci:

1. Explore the effectiveness of working with standardized clients from a student perspective

2. Compare perceptions of interviewing skills from the social work vs. “client” view through interview checklists

3. Explore the effectiveness of acting as a client using improvisation from the theatre student perspective
The interview structure

- Theatre students assigned roles and trained by David for character development and initial reaction to seeing a social worker.

- Social work students paired with one theatre student with whom they worked for 3 sessions.

- Social work students given varying amounts of information depending on the “client.”

- Interviews conducted in front of peers who offered immediate feedback.

- One interview was videotaped.

- All social work students wrote a reflective paper about the experience particularly focusing on interviewing skills.
# Social Work Respondents

## Past experience

Demographic variables in undergraduate student analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of respondents</td>
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<td>$N = 61$</td>
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<td>Paid experience in social service job</td>
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<td>Volunteer experience in social services</td>
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<td>30.1</td>
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<td>First client experience</td>
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<td>14.5</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>No (0)</td>
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## Demographic variable undergraduate program degrees analysis

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<td><strong>Law/Philosophy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>English/Communication</td>
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<td>6.3</td>
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<td>Human Services/ Family Studies</td>
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<td>6.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>History (American, African)</td>
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<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education/Italian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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Five areas explored

- Assistance with practice skills
- Ability to integrate knowledge
- Use of feedback
- Use of checklists
- Suggestions for improvement
Assistance with practice skills

- Allowed for evaluation of self: strengths, style, areas to improve
- More willing to try out skills/techniques because it was not a real client
- Resembled real life
- Facilitated “thinking on your feet”
- An ethical way to practice skills

“Gave me the opportunity to practice skills with a ‘client’ who was not another SW student which helped me prepare for things that were a little more unpredictable”
Ability to integrate knowledge

- Provided good proximity to what was learned in the classroom
- Immediate application of concepts/theories/skills
- Increased research of specific methods to use with clients
- Increased self-reflection

“I found the fact that we did three interviews allowed me several opportunities to translate theory into practice.”
Use of feedback

- The “clients” were able to be more objective/honest
- Increased levels of awareness
- Was a confidence booster
- Varied quality: good feedback from peers and instructor, mostly positive or no feedback from “clients”

“Feedback was VERY important and helpful in improving my skills. I self reflected on the constructive criticism I received and am currently working to avoid future mistakes.”
Use of checklists

- Not used very much
- Guided sessions
- Reminders of things to do
- Helped to focus/structure interviews

“The checklist helped me to keep in mind the skills and tools that I should have in my toolbox when doing the work.”
Suggestions for improvement

- MORE: more sessions, more time in sessions, more time between sessions, more information given to clients, more feedback from clients, more feedback from instructor

- Theatre students should get credit for their work

- Theatre students should be given more information about social work roles

- Videotape all sessions

“I was really apprehensive about the simulation, but now, I would prefer to do this with a theatre student than a fellow MSW student. It provided a sense of realism and the ‘client’ was unbiased in feedback.”
Limitations

- Small sample size
- Challenges of collecting data
- Inconsistency in provision of feedback
- Insufficient demographic information obtained so correlations were not able to be made
Implications

• Use of theatre students acting as clients is both welcome and effective in facilitating skill development for social work education

• The expanded format of 3 sessions allows both social work students and theatre students to practice their skills

• The evolution of the project was very dependent on the working relationship of the faculty

• Time is needed to manage the logistics of scheduling
Future research

• Further refinement of the research design to test the degree of skill development through use of standardized client interviews

• Evaluation of the use of Skype interviews with theatre students by social work students in the online program

• Continued refinement of the research design to test the degree improvisational skill development for theatre students