The Use of Decision Cases to Foster Critical Thinking in Social Work Students

Citation:
Critical thinking is one of the 10 core competencies set by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008)

- However, only 8% of graduating seniors can be considered proficient critical thinkers (Educational Testing Service, 2012)

Models for teaching critical thinking:
- Post-positivist: emphasize importance of scientific reasoning (Gibbs & Gambrill, 1999)
- Constructivist: emphasize importance of reflection and problem-based learning (Gibbons & Gray, 2004)
Most social work cases are used to illustrate a concept or the successful resolution of a dilemma (Lundeberg, Levin, & Harrington, 1999).

In contrast, decision cases present a problem to be solved, rather than an example of ideal practice (Lundeberg et al., 1999).
Cognitive Development Theory and Decision Cases

- Motivational value: students are more engaged and interested (Lundeberg et al., 1999)
  - Active discovery based on student’s interest promotes learning (Crain, 1985)
- Perplexity: encourages consideration of more comprehensive positions
  - Doubt and uncertainty generate critical thinking (Dewey, 1933)
- Safe learning environment: encourages critical thinking by inviting discussion and the challenging of authority (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003)
Outcomes of Case-Based Instruction

• Improvements in reasoning ability over the course of a semester (Lundeberg et al., 1999)

• Better able to identify own biases, identify key issues, understand other perspectives, explain and support decisions, imagine creative solutions, make ethical decisions, and integrate previous learning (Wolfer & Miller-Cribbs, 2007)

• Increased interest in topics covered (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003)
Graduate students at USC take a capstone course during their final semester with a real-world case at each class session:

– Stimulates interest
– Includes variety of overlapping issues
– Challenges views of reality
– Creates the cognitive dissonance that theorists agree is the ideal learning environment for promoting critical thinking
• Instructor guides students toward deeper analysis through open-ended questions (Wolfer, 2006)
• Students may find these questions difficult (Wolfer, 2006)
  – Highlight issues they had not considered
  – Have to defend conclusions
  – May find ambiguity unsettling
  – Realize that they may overlooked evidence or did not know things their peers knew
• Important to teach critical thinking skills—educators need to explore alternatives that hold promise of that outcome
• Decision cases place students at the center of the learning experience and are a compelling alternative or supplement to traditional instruction


Prepared by H Goldstein (2014)