Reflexivity through experiential learning in Social Work Education: Implications for Signature Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT: Experiential learning addresses learners across their socio-demographic identity; evidence demonstrates that it is inclusive. An effective approach to facilitating learners is by providing real experiences and opportunities for them to synthesize, reflect and learn. Drawing from David Kolb's model of experiential learning, he vehement the need for active experimentation to augment the learning process and achievement of learning outcomes in professional courses, especially in the case of Social Work. The paper captures the narratives of social work students' experiences engaged in field practicum. The study employs the Focused Group Discussion with thirty-two social work students to understand the flow of learning and self-reflection. The synthesis reveals key pedagogical changes that social work education could imbibe in the current scenario to align with the National Education Policy 2020 and balance emergent aspects of critical pedagogy.

Keywords: Kolb's learning cycle, pedagogy, experiential learning, reflection, case study, social work

The Sustainable Development Goal number four asserts the need for Quality Education and highlights the need for ensuring inclusive and quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. There is an emphasis on creating barrier-free learning contexts in accessing quality education. The National Education Policy also highlights the need for holistic higher multidisciplinary education. Harvey and Williams (2010), in the review of 15 years of contribution to Quality Education, assert that the concept of quality education should not be detached from the context and its purpose. Hertel and Millis (2002) have extensively written about the application of simulated learning as a tool for achieving quality education. Hertel and Millis (2002) and Cunningham (1984) link simulated learning to generic goals of quality in higher education, which include- a) transfer of knowledge, b) skill development, and c) application of skills and knowledge. For inter-professional and multidisciplinary courses, several researchers advocate and promote experiential learning (Poore & Cullen et al., 2014; Healey & Jenkins, 2000).

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Simulated learning and experiential learning

According to Association for Experiential Learning (2007:2014), the following components must exist for pedagogy to qualify as one:

- Careful selection, design, and curation of learning opportunities
- Evaluation of whether they align with an emergent learning outcome, opportunities, and skills
- Ensuring that the learner is actively engaged in reflective questioning, investigating, problem-solving, and experimenting the
- Reflection during the learning process is a crucial aspect of experiential learning. This encourages students to reflect on analysis, critical thinking, and synthesis during and posts the assignment (Schon, 1983; Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993)
- Learners engaged with the simulation intellectually, emotionally, socially, and/or physically.

Moore (2010) believes experiential learning is a recognizable transition from sit-down examination, reading assignments, memory-based assessment patterns, and those related to lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy. John Dewey, David Kolb, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget have heavily contributed to experiential learning. Among this plethora of studies and applications, Kolb's experiential learning aligns with the learner's journey. On reading closely, these assertions align with Shulman's (2005) three fundamental dimensions, 'to think,' 'to perform,' and 'to act' with integrity which is crucial to professional work. Therefore Shulman's claim can be expired for professional Social Work in India. Gurung, Chick, & Haynie, 2019; Shulman, 2005 lend a similar view in the Canadian context, where Shulman underlines the need for immersion in the discipline.

Kolb's Experiential Learning

David Kolb, in 2007 propounded the learning cycle aligning with the basic premises of experiential learning; he referred to the cycle as learning styles inventory, which aimed at capturing the cognitive processing of information by the learners. Kolb (2012) asserted that new conceptual development and concrete operations result from experiences and subsequent reflection. The experiential learning cycle consists of four stages which are as listed:

- The concrete experience is a stage of exposure to a new experience, e.g. initiating the assignment based on the criteria communicated by the facilitator; it involves divergent thinking.
- Reflective observation involves understanding and processing the gap between the conceptual understanding and the experience through the process of assimilation; it includes the alignment of newly learnt concepts with the reality just encountered in the first stage of Kolb's learning cycle (2008).
- Abstract conceptualization is when the processing has concluded, novel ideas and concepts have risen from the same, and the learner engages in convergent thinking.

- Active experimentation is the stage of accommodation when the learner applies the newly acquired or learnt concept to test its application in a different context.

The last and first stage of the cycle, concrete experiences and active experimentation, involves an affective aspect of learning, while the middle stages include cognitive. The stages are fluid, and Kolb (2008) indicated that the efficacy, pace, and quality of learning depend on the learner's personality, social and cultural background and disposition. Its application also differed based on the nature of the course pursued by the learner. As discussed above, the learners can garner rich and robust learning experiences in a guided manner in interdisciplinary and inter-professional courses. This trend is found to be present in the case of medical, legal, education, and clinic and community-based courses with a component of field-based practicum, as in the case of Social Work education which is the focal point of the present paper. Learning simulation the participants in the study underwent included Rural immersion, setting up Ground level panels in the community, community conflict mapping and mock parliaments.

Social Work education and training

The Committee of Social Work Education set up by the University Grants Commission drafted the Model Social Work Curriculum (2001), which designated 'practice learning' to be a core component of the social work academic program and described it as 'essential for all institutions facilitating a course of Social Work curriculum, it calls for guided practice learning, and Field Work component has to a great extent addressed this element. Additionally, the experiential pedagogical assignment associated with fieldwork also aligns with simulated learning.

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Review of literature

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Literature relating to major key themes such as 'Kolb's Learning Theory,' 'Andragogy,' 'Social Work Education. 'Teaching and learning,' 'Simulated learning,' 'Experiential learning,' and 'Reflexivity' were searched through the databases and reviewed using the Boolean logic of 'AND' and 'OR.' Over 200 research articles identified and reviewed to study the factors, determinants, andragogy, and pedagogy were thoroughly searched to explore the outcomes of simulated learning among social work learners. The studies on experiential learning and simulated learning focused on professional courses and related andragogy; however, these studies emanate from Western contexts, while professional insights from Professional courses from the Global South are limited. There are great studies in the context of business and medical studies and even in education to a certain extent, while other domains in Social Sciences remain unexplored. The review highlights the paucity of literature in teaching and pedagogical translations in Social Work.

Theoretical and conceptual underpinnings

The paper employs Kolb's experiential learning cycle to analyze the framework of learning theories social work learners adopt in a professional course. The simulated experiences of Rural camp, mock parliament, community and conflict mapping, and other studies as distinct pedagogies and anthologies delineate the teaching and learning process. Kolb stated:

"Learning is the experience whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." (Kolb:1984, p.38)

The transformation is operational through four cycles: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The cycle of learning concepts, their synthesis, conceptualization, and application of the concept in field reality mirror and adaptation of the experiential learning cycle. The last stage is active learning is further synthesized as a free and flexible aspect of learning through experimentation with a reflection by the students.

Materials and Methods

The study employs a descriptive design with qualitative nature of studies actively pursuing courses involving Social Work participants who are direct stakeholders. The methods used were Focussed Group Discussions (FGDs). The unit of analysis is each student who participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents for the FGD; fifty respondents were categorized into five groups of 10 participants each. These are students in the final year of the Master's program in Social Work course in India and have undergone four continuous credited Field Work cycles as a part of their course requirement. The data obtained through FGD were subjected to qualitative analysis (Thematic Analysis) by drawing from the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

Table 1: Themes emerging through the analysis of the narratives

Categories	Themes	Excerpts from discussion
Cognition	*Analysis* *Conceptual Clarity* *Unlearning* *Critical thinking*	'….we got to do PRA and try it out. We could get to see how it works and how to conduct it. I was a part of the wealth mapping, and I got to do the wealth mapping with many males and females in the village. It was a good learning activity, and there was good participation from the village members. We could observe that people spent mostly for medical purposes and had very few savings; this we could relate to health programs and policies we studied in class. The most were seen to be spent in hospitals, and this was again very intriguing that even government hospitals are charging a lot.'-AA
Emotion	*Introspection* *Anticipation* *Excitement*	'This session helped me control my emotions and think about how the real home minister would behave if he were in my shoes. This also helped me to get out of my comfort zone or my ego and not to take comments too personally. The session also helped me to control my excessive speaking and to get to the point with crisp responses as time was limited.'-AB.
Skills	*Self-awareness* *Self-management* *Documenting*	'….the problems stem from a lack of understanding, accessibility, and inclusivity. New ideas that promote the well-being of the marginalized have been blocked by societal factors such as culture and traditional

		thinking. Aside from that, there is a void in policy implementation for marginalized communities.' KA
	• *Fortifying social capital* • *Cultural sensitivity*	'…we conducted a transect walk and survey, the things that we had only learned in our classes. Implementing what we had learned as part of our curriculum was a pleasant surprise. We could recite and talk about the laws and schemes we had just studied as part of our course. PRA was supremely educational, and we had to go door to door to ask questions and invite the members to participate in the activities. We had to use resources like leaves, branches, rocks, coal, seeds, fruits, etc. as indicators of a crop in seasonal agricultural mapping.'-AM.
Transformation	• *Change* • *Growth* • *Flow*	..I heard several of my classmates saying that they do experience a growth, a tangible growth which is easily visible in the thought process, demeanour and confidence through field engagement. I have felt it too, and I can easily see that through the reflections from the first semester till the third semester. My change was attitudinal; my POV seems to be changing.' - SS.

Discussion

Cognition

The development of articulation and the ability to deduce assertions from field experiences focus on Shulman's (2005) *habit of mind* and Kolb's (2008) abstract conceptualizations. With direct reference to cognitive aspects, including components of Kolb's cycle, the student's engagement in mapping community conflicts exposed learners to the reflexive activity of *analyzing*, and performing the concrete and abstract operations.

The political and social unrest and causal conflicts reflect the need for Social Work interventions and especially conflict resolution skills. Ramon focuses on the need to develop and explore the complex roles of Social Work interventions (Ramon 2006 1, 2012). Zooming from the lens of micro-aggression and conflicts in the community to larger macro and political level conflicts, there is a necessity for social work education to enter the spheres of teaching and learning community conflicts (Giroux, 2020:1985). As a Global South with a history of being a colony, India has witnessed violence, genocides, and arson at different points in history.

Social Work education directly engages with community organizing and development, and their reflection from mapping community conflicts narratives affirms their analysis of the conflicts through the framework of human rights and justice. Broadly the values and ethics of professional social work are also evident here.

'The communities are more multicultural than they used to be; it could have led to more heterogeneity, hence reduced tolerance.' PP

'*The communities with more conflicts are those with minimal developmental reform. The political parties favour the affluent groups, and the political entities make no alternative arrangements.*'-SK.

'*Cultural intermixture is the key to conflict mitigation. It emerges from stress and strains in community components that demand the utilization of resources through power. Conflicts pave the way for positive changes*' -AJ.

Autonomy and freedom in the learning process is a repetitive terminology in student narratives concerning learning experiences. A student shared:

'*Since I could choose the community for community conflict mapping, I chose my community which had experienced decades of discrimination at the hands of the dominant regional community; I could use this opportunity to interact with members of the dominant community and understand their perspective. The teacher also allowed deciding the number of sessions, and this helped me in planning and intervening for mitigation as we could garner ample time for dialogue which is essential as per Johan Galtung.*'

The narrative indicates two aspects; firstly, the time duration, criteria, and flexibility were used constructively to exercise autonomy, which allowed learning and an emotional level of engagement with an issue that the learners were facing at his psycho-social level. Secondly, by gaining *clarity* and a better explanation of the concepts learned in the classroom, the effectiveness of the simulated learning assignment can also be based on the level of conceptual clarity.

Relearning could be seen as a conscious means to be resilient. *Unlearning and relearning* as both a result of a stressful situation, a need, or a vacuum; therefore, learning could be seen as a response to reinstate the same as resilience. As Howells and Scholderer (2011) highlighted, there was a need to identify skills for efficient learning.

'*During the discussion, different areas and levels of marginalization were addressed. The different themes that were addressed were marginalization based on disability, gender, and physical appearance. The above three themes were addressed at different levels, namely at educational institutions, workplaces, and in the general public. Based on the discussion, the following responses have been recorded: On a grassroots level, by bringing necessary awareness. Normalizing things that were always overlooked on the grounds of historic patterns and conditioning of our minds*'-CS

The emphasis on critiquing the *'conditioning of the minds'* reflects the unlearning process and the introspection which has emanated from the experiential process. The questions guide the reflectivity at each stage, which churns the wheels for the transformation of the learner. Some of the questions which students were posed to guide the reflection are as listed:

- How can we ensure the policy level changes are democratic?

- How is this going to impact marginalized identities?

- The minority who opposed the Bill, how is it justifiable for them to still follow the law?

- How is the proposed bill beneficial for the people at large?

- How can we involve people at the grassroots level in drafting and review of the Bill?

- What are the needs of the community members, and what could be the suggested intervention?

- Do we make interventions in a short period?

- What are the marginalized groups within the community, and how can they benefit from the intervention?

- How are the needs and proposed interventions going to be different in urban or rural scenarios?

- What are the perspectives of students on community conflicts and resolution?

- How do they perceive the role of different agents in a conflict through the framework proposed by Galtung?

- What are the propositions made by students of social work in conflict resolution?

- What were the mediums and tools used in the teaching and learning of community conflict?

- What is the implication in teaching and learning of community conflicts in Social Work?

- What are the determinants that cause conflicts, and how can they be mitigated?

Emotion

The rural camp is designed to introduce the rural community to the students of social work through the immersive experience. This rural camp facilitates social work trainees to implement social programs in rural communities. The students experience group living, community living, and team building and initiate fundamentals of community organization, advocacy and social action, which are core to social work practice. These elements are closely related to controlled emotional engagement. The sharing by a student reflects the citizenry, political and social consciousness, which depict reflexivity and the *habits of the heart* (Shulman, 2005). It also underlies the *excitement* and eagerness to demonstrate the learning.

'…throughout the overall process, learnt how to look at a bill in the house and should think about the welfare of people before anything else. How important is the role the opposition party plays in parliament? Even though the bill is proposed by the government, there will be an equal amount of responsibility on the opposition, too, to look at how good the decision is concerning people's welfare which I am eager to implement. These activities stimulate in me a need to implement the learnings at the earliest'-BFS

Another student remarked,

'While we were doing the survey, some of us happened to see a strange thing practiced in the community: the menstruating women were sent to an abandoned home and were restricted from touching anyone or cooking. And even children in 3rd and 4th grade were also warning us not to enter the designated house or else we would be possessed by some spirits. That was strange and discouraging to see this as a woman myself and come across it in this 21st century. It shows social and cultural issues. I am sure how I will handle these issues in the community, and how do I stop my views from entering the judgment.'-AJ.

Skill acquisition

Alongside the specific course-related skills, the learners also gain mastery over self-awareness and intra-personal skills. Referring to the course-related skills, students remarked:

'While I was mobilizing the community for conducting matrix ranking, I also got appraised about public speaking, learnt functional Kannada, and acquired patience to work in teams and located several individuals and organizations that are working in that area.' AT

This highlights the considerable skills learners engage with while performing a task. These narratives aligning with skills can be traced to Program Specific Objectives and further to Graduate Attributes.

Transformation

The transformation of the trainee is not a penultimate outcome but a process determined by cognitive engagement, analysis of the situation, and awareness of one's capacities and challenges; the emotional prompting facilitates genuine introspection, critical thinking and acquisition of skills. As Kolb (2005) indicated, reflexivity is the catalyst that drives the transformation, but it is not restricted to a specific stage in the experiential learning cycle. The reflexivity propels the learner's movement from one stage of experiential learning to another. Hence fieldwork exposure and other aspects must be facilitated to learners through the stream of reflexivity.

Implications for Social Work Facilitators

The anecdotes and narratives post-reflection point towards the following implications for educators:

1. Reflexivity is the key that promulgates movement across the stages of experiential learning, and Social work educators must accelerate it.
2. Designing suitable simulation and experiential assignments with careful curation aligning with outcome-based education.
3. Careful planning and designing of the evaluation rubrics based on the higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy.
4. Pose questions and problems and encourage the resolution of the problems through the simulated activity.

5. Help the learner navigate across the learning cycles and explore the gap in conceptual understanding and practical experience.
6. Attempting decolonizing education through experiential learning

Experiential learning aligns with Frierian ways of teaching and learning and hence is viewed as anti-hegemonic strategies. Instructional teacher-centric modes are inadvertently found to be promulgating hegemonic and colonized practices owing to using what is already '*available*' in databases and accessibility of Westernized knowledge for learners and even educators.

7. Critical pedagogy can only stimulate critical thinking among students (Giroux, 1983: Ichikawa, 2019).
8. Supervision and mentoring to be strengthened

Conclusion

The simulated learning context is learner-centric but is designed by the educator; this curation step is directly linked to the quality of learning. The learner, as evident in the reflections, can exercise autonomy at the same time, vacillating to the facilitator for clarifications and learning exercises with answers to reflective questions. While the paper discusses the case of four such illustrations of experiential learning, some multiple such strategies and practices can be designed with learners to ensure augmented learning opportunities.

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