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Teaching social work students to speak up

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ABSTRACT
It takes courage to defend your values or boundaries in the face of emotional and social risks. Social work advocacy, relationships, resilience and education all rely on the ability to engage in 'difficult conversations', defined as dialogue to defend personal values or boundaries in the face of potential social or emotional risks. Yet, students often speak of feeling scared, unskilled and prone to instinctive response patterns when trying to speak up, making the question of how we can teach moral courage an important and understudied area of pedagogical research. In this article, we describe a Canadian pilot study to develop and evaluate learning activities developed for an undergraduate social work practicum seminar course to help students to speak up. We describe the key elements of the learning activities co-developed with students, and outline the SPEAKER model which resulted from the study as a way of helping students to assess, safely engage in and experience success with, these difficult conversations. Drawing on the concepts of embodied learning, the pedagogy of discomfort and identity theory, we suggest the value of building learning around the naturally occurring 'difficult conversations' faced by students in their practicum and other areas of their life.

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Introduction

The ability to speak up honestly underpins social work's advocacy mandate and has been identified as key to effective helping relationships (Gallagher et al., 2011; Ghaffar, Manby, & Race, 2012), strengths-based practice (Oliver, 2017) and professional resilience (Austin, 2007; Austin, Rankel, Kagan, Bergum, & Lemermeyer, 2005). It is expected of social work students, who are required to articulate their values and perspectives in the classroom and actively negotiate their practicum goals, learning opportunities and evaluations (Bogo, 2010; Drolet, Clark, & Allen, 2012; Gillespie, 2012; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Regehr, 2013; Robinson, Robinson, & McCaskill, 2013) as they prepare for careers in which they will need to speak up often for client needs, human rights and social justice. Yet, speaking up frequently carries the risk of rejection, censure, exposure or relational rupture. It requires

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moral courage, defined as the 'capacity to overcome fear and … the willingness to speak out and do that which is right in the face of forces that would lead a person to act in some other way' (Lachman, 2007, p. 131).

Students can have difficulty being open even with their practicum supervisors, faculty and peers (Cushing, Abbott, Lothian, Hall, & Westwood, 2011; Goodboy, Bolkan, & Goldman, 2015; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012). In social work practicum seminars at a large Canadian university, we have frequently heard them speak of feeling scared, unskilled and prone to instinctive response patterns when trying to have their say. In this article, we report findings of a small study piloting pedagogical approaches to increase student competence and confidence to engage in 'difficult conversations', defined as dialogue to defend personal values or boundaries in the face of potential social or emotional risks. While our direct experience is with Canadian social work students, the similarities of social work education in the US, UK and Australia and the inclusion of literature from these countries, suggest the findings may be of interest further afield.

Speaking up in practicum

Consider the frequency with which social work students are expected to engage in 'difficult conversations' as part of their field practicum experience. In addition to engaging in practice-based advocacy and boundary-setting with clients, colleagues and systems, they are commonly required to articulate their learning needs to their practicum supervisor, negotiate their learning contract and participate in the evaluation of their own performance (Bogo, 2006; Cleak, Hawkins, Laughton, & Williams, 2014; Regehr, Regehr, Leeson, & Fusco, 2002). Such tasks require a great deal of transparency from students in a relationship in which practicum supervisors hold considerable power. We already know that supervisors can find it hard to be honest in their evaluations of students (Bogo, Regehr, Power, & Regehr, 2007). How much harder is it for students to speak openly about their experiences when the practicum supervisors with whom they must negotiate are deemed to be experts on social work practice and on the student's performance? The pressure on placements and under-recognition of the role of practicum supervisors (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012) can create further barriers, leading to placements with supervisors who lack the ability to support student self-expression and to student reluctance to 'rock the boat' when good placements are at a premium. Yet, if social work practicums are to constitute an authentic three-way partnership between learner, practice supervisor and faculty, students need to be able to say what is on their mind.

The same holds true for the field seminars which commonly accompany the practicum (Bogo, 2010; Drolet et al., 2012; Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2003). These seminars typically provide a forum for problem-solving practicum challenges, offering a supportive space and access to a variety of theoretical lenses. Their success relies on students being able to share their struggles, express their differences and speak up about a range of personal experiences and perspectives from which their peers can learn. To do this, students need to overcome the risk of social embarrassment, fear of conflict and negative responses to threats to group harmony and stability (Packer, Fujita, & Chasteen, 2014). There are powerful pressures on students to avoid expressing truths that may undermine their credibility or alienate peers and the faculty charged with judging their suitability for the profession.

Whether in the classroom or the practicum setting, encouraging a student to speak up without having first assessed and managed the accompanying risks can set the student up to fail, foster disunity and leave peers, instructor or practicum supervisor on the defensive. There is a need to tread carefully, with the objective being to present students with knowledge and competencies that increase self-efficacy and avoid them 'rushing into the most dangerous situations hoping to survive somehow' (Osswald, Greitemeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2010, p. 161). What constitutes a difficult conversation will be different for each person, and developing the skills and courage to speak up is an area of lifelong and highly contextualized learning. However, we contest that in an area so central to social work, we need to draw on the most effective pedagogical strategies. As one Professor of Social Work puts it,

> Has anyone heard of a course in moral courage—in primary education, in college, or in any school of social work? I haven't. If we expect social workers … to act ethically, shouldn't we equip them with the skills they need to put ethics into action? Shouldn't social work education include the development of moral courage? … What knowledge and information should we provide, and what types of learning experiences should be used to promote moral courage? (Barsky, 2009)

Methodology

Developing the teaching and learning activities

Drawing on lived experience and a review of relevant literature, the authors collaborated with 10 social work students to develop 'Difficult Conversations' learning activities for an undergraduate social work practicum seminar course. The course consisted of a three hour class every two weeks for the two terms that students were in practicum. The learning activities were piloted by a class of 16 students and were focussed on three core pedagogical activities:

Creating a safe space for students to talk about difficult conversations

Learning activities included student creation of classroom guidelines and regular, facilitated group discussions for debriefing and support. Emotional regulation activities began and/or ended every class, for example a guided meditation to help students become aware of their emotional and bodily sensations and an exercise in which students noticed differences in their emotional state after 'power posing' (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010).

Orienting students to the concept of difficult conversations and introducing a model that students could employ to navigate such conversations

Students were introduced to the concept and relevance of difficult conversations through lecture and discussion. A practice model was adapted from Rushton's (2006) moral distress model to guide students through the steps of engaging in a difficult conversation in the following way:

(1) Ask if a difficult conversation is needed.
(2) Assess the safety of the conversation.
(3) Affirm the right to choose whether or not to have the conversation.
(4) Acknowledge shared goals.
(5) Arrange space for the conversation.
(6) Act on the plan to have the conversation.

Students were given a wallet-sized 'prompt card' to help them to remember and use the model beyond the classroom. Using the model as a framework, four students from the previous year's class returned to tell stories of difficult conversations they had experienced in practicum.

Prompting application of the model to real-life difficult conversations

Students used a reflective journal entry to identify aspects of their practicum they might find difficult to discuss with their supervisor in their mid-point practicum evaluation. They completed a worksheet prompting them to prepare for the difficult conversation using the model, before rehearsing the conversation in role plays. In a 'Playing your Difficult Conversation Card' activity, students used the model to approach a real-life difficult conversation they were facing in practicum or elsewhere, before reporting back to the class about learning gained from the experience. It is important to note that the third stage of the model affirmed the right of students to choose whether or not to choose to have the conversation. Students could complete this learning activity even if they chose not to have the conversation, so long they could explain in the report-back their rationale for this decision.

Evaluating the teaching and learning activities

The study to evaluate the new learning activities was informed by an epistemology of pragmatism (Dewey, 1920/2004; Haack & Lane, 2006) and approved by the University Ethics Board. Student participation in the evaluation was voluntary and pursuant to participant written consent. At no point was the raw data accessible to Social Work faculty, and the anonymized data only became accessible to the Social Work researchers after student grades had been submitted. Participant characteristics like gender, age and ethnicity were deemed too identifying to be recorded. It was necessary to sacrifice this information to ensure students felt safe to freely express their views.

The learning activities were evaluated via an online survey administered at the beginning and end of the course, in which twelve students participated. Six students also participated in an audio-recorded focus group or interview with a non-Social Work member of the research team. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data were analysed using a qualitative description approach (Sandelowski, 2000), using a process of coding and constant comparative analysis borrowed from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings

The learning activities helped

All participating students rated the learning activities as having helped them to feel more prepared, more able to have a difficult conversation and more likely to have one in the future. The mean rating for the statement 'I know how to have a difficult conversation with a supervisor' increased by .9 in the post-course survey to 3.8 on a scale in which 1 represented 'Not at all true' and 4 represented 'Very true'. While little can be inferred from such a small data-set ($n = 10$), the trend of positive impact is congruent with students' comments about coming to realise that difficult conversations were 'a thing' which could be considered,

thoughtfully prepared for, and proactively manipulated in favour of a positive outcome. As one student said, the curriculum 'allowed you to see that there were steps to a difficult conversation, and clear steps too. I could see the breadth, and it was tangible.'

Students also talked about changes in their emotional responses to a difficult conversation. When asked how they handled difficult conversations prior to the course, they described patterns of avoidance, 'passive-aggressive actions', 'apologizing for being difficult/complicated' or 'lashing out'. Students spoke of the learning activities as helping them to feel more confident, relaxed and empathetic, and less guilty, scared and reactive. As one student commented,

> As Social Work students we feel like we always need to stand up for social justice, and we can feel guilty and disappointed in ourselves. Knowing that you can pick your battles, and not feeling guilty. [Before] I would feel pressure to jump in, and if I wasn't able to speak up I would beat myself up.

The Difficult Conversations model was useful but insufficiently memorable

Students developed an understanding of the different aspects of having a difficult conversation by learning about and applying the Difficult Conversations model, which they all rated as an effective learning tool. As one said,

> The structure of [the model] was helpful, seeing it written out like that, I didn't use it every time but I knew what [it was]. I didn't use every step, but the idea was there, and I could break down the conversation I had in the past.

The model was discussed a means of preparing for a conversation and, more commonly, as a means of reflecting on it after the event. Different students focussed on different parts of the model as being helpful. Each step in the difficult conversation model was emphasised by at least one student, suggesting that each had pedagogical value.

The Difficult Conversations card was identified as a useful memory aid and tool supporting the model's practical application. As one student said,

> I like that they gave us little cards. To be out in the field and be able to take the card out and look at it was good. Difficult conversations come up and they aren't anticipated. It is a surprise thing. It is good to have the card on hand.

However, several students discussed or demonstrated problems in remembering the steps of the model, suggesting that a more memorable heuristic was needed.

The authenticity of the learning activity mattered

Authenticity was one of the most valued aspects of the 'Playing your Difficult Conversation Card' activity. Over the course of their practicum, all students noticed the signs of distress and compromised values and boundaries that *might* prompt a difficult conversation (Table 1). These involved situations in which students felt compromised within a working relationship, for instance by a peer who did not contribute equitably to a shared project, by service users violating professional boundaries, or by practicum supervisors or faculty responding ineffectively to student needs. For two students it involved addressing structural rather than interactional issues, for instance advocating for a more supportive agency response to service users. The 'Playing your Difficult Conversation Card' activity enabled students

Table 1. Students' 'real' difficult conversations.

The other party to the conversation	Reason for the difficult conversation: To advocate for personal values/boundaries	Reason for the difficult conversation: To advocate for social justice issues
Peer	• Asking a fellow student to contribute more to a group project	
Practicum client	• Asking a client to refrain from inappropriate communication with the student • Talking with a client about a previous incident of inappropriate behaviour • Establishing role-appropriate boundaries in the working relationship	
Practicum supervisor	• Asking the supervisor to treat the student in a more respectful way • Asking the supervisor for a more role-appropriate learning opportunity	• Exploring ways for service delivery to be more inclusive of a specific marginalized population • Advocating for more equitable service delivery
Practicum manager	• Challenging an inappropriate comment	
Instructor	• Asserting learning goals and needs for next year	

to experiment with applying their learning to these situations. It was rated one of the most effective learning activities, with perceived 'success' in the conversation being highly motivating, as demonstrated by student comments like 'I'm way better at having difficult conversation now. I practiced … *I got actual experience*' and 'I have seen firsthand the positive outcomes of having these conversations and I think that this will make confronting issues in my professional practice and personal life easier.'

In contrast, the role play activities received mixed reviews. Students had the opportunity to apply their learning through role plays rehearsing setting boundaries with service users, and discussing with their supervisor the aspects of their practicum about which they felt dissatisfied. It was only when these activities were perceived to address an authentic challenge for the student, that they were described as effective.

Power was integral to assessing the difficulty and success of the conversation

Issues of power impacted student engagement in the learning activities in two ways. A student's social location could increase the risks of the conversation and limit access to strategies to mitigate those risks. As one student commented, 'I am a racialized young woman, and a difficult conversation is just different for me than it is for a cis-gendered white male'. Structural inequalities faced by students of non-hegemonic identities influenced the difficulty of speaking up, and there was a call for this to be more clearly reflected in the course content.

Power also played into the perceived success of the difficult conversation. Most students used the 'Playing your Difficult Conversation Card' activity to advocate for their personal values or boundaries, and they experienced these conversations as successful. Two students, however, used the activity to raise social justice issues whose resolution challenged powerful

interests and required systemic change. Neither student felt adequately prepared for their supervisor's defensive response and both felt discouraged, interpreting their inability to elicit their supervisor's agreement or action as a matter of personal failure. As one said, 'I felt like I failed … I didn't do it justice. I didn't use the model well enough. The power structure, the supervisor didn't want me to make the other agency … look bad, it was all really frustrating.'

Peer discussion and storytelling was particularly useful

The curriculum included regular small group discussions, large group discussions and the story-telling component of the 'Playing your Difficult Conversation Card' activity. The large group activities were deemed helpful for widening the scope of student learning by introducing a range of perspectives and strategies. The small groups were valued for offering a safe space for storytelling, reflection and gathering and contributing ideas. As one student said,

> We got together in groups of three, and we talked about difficult conversations we had in the past, and how we tended to approach those conversations. We were all very comfortable with each other, so we were able to say what we would really have done in those situations. We could bounce ideas off of each other.

The positive response to these peer activities contrasted with the response to the activity in which students from the previous year visited the class to share their stories of difficult conversations. This was rated the least effective learning activity. These former students were not perceived as peers, and the absence of a sufficiently trusting relationship with the class made it hard for their stories to be understood in their full context or to become a springboard for dialogue. They were also not seen as credible experts, lacking the experience and teaching skills to make their stories helpful.

A supportive learning environment is essential

Learning to speak up as students involved identifying and overcoming feelings of anxiety, fear and powerlessness. It came with a need for significant support as it involved, in one student's words, 'putting people out there to be vulnerable.' Students spoke of the importance of three forms of support: a trusting classroom environment, a caring instructor and access to supportive others. They frequently directly attributed their engagement with the learning activities to the safety of the learning environment, and valued actions, both in and outside the classroom, that conveyed support, fallibility, collaboration and understanding. These contributed to an atmosphere of openness:

> I felt like people were honest, that they would really tell you what they thought, and people were sharing personal things from their placements. I've never had a class where I felt that comfortable. Maybe it was what we were talking about. It was non-judgmental, I never had a classroom feel this comfortable to open up.

Limitations

In line with the pragmatist stance informing this study, all conclusions drawn from this research should be seen as tentative and fallible. Not all students participated in the study and it is impossible to discern the extent to which those who did represented the views of their peers. It is possible that the increase in confidence and skills that students attributed

to the Difficult Conversations learning activities may be attributable to other learning and life experiences over the duration of the course, or to student desire to have improved in this area. The small scale of the study means that findings are best viewed as suggestive of possible patterns and themes for further exploration.

Discussion

Only a small body of research from the fields of social work, nursing, ethics, business management and leadership focusses on pedagogical strategies to foster the courage and skills needed to engage in difficult conversations (Comer & Vega, 2005; Doyle, Copeland, Bush, Stein, & Thompson, 2011; Grady et al., 2008; May, Luth, & Schwoerer, 2014; Osswald et al., 2010; Simola, 2015). While this study is also small, it contributes to key messages from that research. It supports the contention that curriculum to support moral courage is worth our time. Moral courage has been characterised as a state rather than a trait (Kidder & McLeod, 2005; May et al., 2014; Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007; Sekerka, Bagozzi, & Charnigo, 2009), meaning that the ability to stand up for what is believed to be right can be learned. The relationships between the desire speak up, the decision to speak up, and the act of speaking up are influenced by context and pre-conscious responses, but they are regulated by conscious choices over which educators have some influence (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007).

The most commonly recommended teaching and learning activities to promote the ability to speak up in the face of social and emotional risks are experiential learning strategies informed by Kolb's classic model of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). These help students to reflect on real-life experiences, through discussion and the use of case studies, often making sense of these experiences through the application of decision-making or other frameworks (Bevan, Kipka, Sekerka, Godwin, & Charnigo, 2012; Comer & Vega, 2005; Doyle et al., 2011; Gosenpud & Werner, 2015; Simola, 2015). Balanced Experiential Inquiry, for instance, is a reflection and dialogue model intended to help business students work with ethical scenarios from their own life to strengthen their capacity to take moral action in the face of negative emotions and the need for approval (Bevan, Kipka, Sekerka, Godwin, & Charnigo, 2012, p. 278). In a similar approach, the 'Awareness, Feelings, Listen, and Solve' model (Doyle et al., 2011) is applied to vignettes of troublesome situations reported by nurses. As in our study, students learn behavioural routines through the application of a model to past or future real-life experiences. They rehearse the routines, typically through role-playing and experiential group exercises (Doyle et al., 2011; Osswald et al., 2010), in order that they might access them more easily in times of high emotional arousal.

It has been suggested that teaching for moral courage is best done through:

(1) Discourse and discussion, where the language of rational inquiry clarifies the idea of moral courage and renders it explicable and relevant,
(2) Modelling and mentoring, where real life exemplars demonstrate moral courage in action and chart pathways of human endeavour, and
(3) Practice and persistence, where learners can discipline themselves through direct, incremental skill building that increases their ability to apply moral courage (Kidder & McLeod, 2005).

The peer storytelling and role play activities in our study provided opportunities for discourse and discussion and for students to be exposed to an array of models about what it means to speak up in different contexts. The role plays and 'Playing your Difficult Conversation Card' activity provided opportunities for practice and persistence. It should be noted that the 'real life exemplars' did not need to be particularly grand. The stories told in class denoted moral courage expressed through 'small deeds instead of heroism' (Osswald et al., 2010, p. 160), and the mixed responses to the fourth year stories activity suggested that trust in the storytellers was more important than the scale of the deed.

The stories of moral courage reinforced lecture content that speaking up was a core part of the social worker's role, offering multiple ways in which that role might be performed. From the perspective of identity theory (Tajfel, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), these stories become building blocks from which learners can construct a mental model or 'identity script' (Hotho, 2008) of a morally courageous social worker. Once learners see such an identity as both valued and congruent with their image of what it is to be a professional social worker, they become more likely to invest in it. This is important, as the drive to uphold consistency between self-perception and action means that those who see themselves as morally courageous are more likely to act to speak up when faced with a difficult situation (Simola, 2015).

It has been hypothesised that moral courage is related both to moral meaningfulness (the extent to which one sees values as important to one's working life) and to moral efficacy (the extent to which one believes in one's own ability to defend those values) (May et al., 2014). Moral meaningfulness can be supported by explicitly linking each difficult conversation story to reasons why speaking up to protect values and boundaries is important in our profession, and by learning activities that sensitise students to ethical issues in social work and their past decision-making (Gosenpud & Werner, 2015). Moral efficacy is strengthened by giving students the knowledge and skills needed to engage effectively in difficult conversations (May et al., 2014), and by enabling students to experience their moral courage efforts as successful.

The importance of self-efficacy has led, since the completion of the study, to the Difficult Conversations model being reframed as:

SCAN emotions, values and boundaries
PLAN to address risk
ELECT whether or not to proceed
ARRANGE space for the conversation
KNOW the common ground
ENACT the plan
RECOGNISE success and areas for growth

The heuristic of 'SPEAKER' describes the original six steps of the model in a way that appears more memorable for students. It adds a seventh and final step to support reflection on the conversation in a way that helps students to identify it as a successful learning experience, no matter the outcome. Even when the conversation does not result in the other party taking the desired actions, it might be celebrated for having challenged the dominant perspective, shown solidarity with others struggling with the same issue, or practised standing up for what is important. This matters, as even just imagining yourself engaging in a productive dissenting conversation can make it more likely that you will express your dissent in the future (Goodboy et al., 2015).

In our study, students identified the importance of authenticity in their difficult conversations rehearsals. The experiential learning activities needed to activate their default emotional and behavioural responses if they were to support useful experimentation in managing those responses. This is consistent with a 'pedagogy of discomfort' (Boler, 1999; Coulter, Campbell, Duffy, & Reilly, 2013; Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012), in which students change habitual responses through an embodied process in which they learn 'in-the-moment' from their emotional, bodily and cognitive reactions when pushed beyond their comfort zone. In his course to develop the skills of activism and dissent, Huish (2013) takes a similar embodied approach. He asks students to organise a real-life protest, thereby putting themselves in a situation in which they directly experience the social and emotional pressures to be silent that an activist must overcome.

It is no easy task for students to identify, track, manage and learn from their responses during a difficult encounter. We echo the call for social workers to be better trained in mindfulness (Lynn, 2010; Mishna & Bogo, 2007; Schreiber, Fuller, & Paceley, 2013), both so they can engage most effectively in difficult conversations, and so they can learn best from the kind of embodied experiential learning this study supports. It is important to remember that even within a pedagogy of discomfort, the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment is a necessity if students are to take the risk of learning new responses (Boler, 1999; Elsden-Clifton, 2008; Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012). In our study, the caring and reciprocity in the classroom, explicit attention within the Difficult Conversations model to the question of safety, and connections to external sources of support provided the conditions in which students could experiment with speaking up. Practicum supervisors could play a key role in supporting student learning in this area; how best to prepare them to do this is an area for future enquiry. The 'sweet spot' of discomfort and safety will be different for each student, making it important that students work only with naturally occurring conversations that they would have to face anyway, and decide for themselves both what constitutes a difficult conversation and the extent to which they engage in it. The difficulties students face in expressing themselves with their supervisors, peers, colleagues and instructors mean there is no shortage of these opportunities to practise.

Conclusion

It is easy to speak up when you have nothing invested and nothing to lose. It is for the times in social work that personal values and boundaries are implicated and that there are real costs to speaking up honestly that our students need to be prepared. Yet, despite its importance, few social work education theorists have addressed the specific question of what teaching strategies best help students to learn to be transparent and to brave potential negative consequences in order to speak their truth. We know that it is not enough to teach students what to do and say in difficult conversations when the problem is often a lack of courage rather than a lack of knowledge. Yet, encouraging students to speak up without considering and addressing the risks of doing so sets them up to experience the failure that supports future silence.

Our study adds to those favouring reflective, experiential and embodied learning activities within an environment that fosters both safety and discomfort. It suggests the value of supporting students to apply their theoretical knowledge of how to have a difficult conversation in situations in which they were authentically emotionally engaged. The good

news is that students in practicum settings typically experience numerous opportunities to practice these skills with their peers, supervisors, colleagues, clients, faculty and social agencies with whom they work. It is not necessary to manufacture situations in which students require courage to speak up in the face of social and emotional risks. Whether it is challenging a supervisor's opinion, voicing the need for self-care, asking for help, defending a cherished value or setting a boundary, these situations are plentiful and, when properly supported, can help students to move from knowing the right thing to say, to saying the thing they know to be right.

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