

Is it Time to Change? Infusing the Transdisciplinary Approach into Social Work Studies

Carol Broersma¹

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide consideration of infusing the transdisciplinary approach into social work studies as a means of meeting the evolving needs of social work students. This study focuses on the traditional and transdisciplinary approaches to social work instruction offering a student based contrast and comparison of the two methods. With an eye on the advancement of social work education, discussion addresses professional isolationism across academia and its impact on emerging helping professionals. The results bring up meaningful implications for the implementation of transdisciplinary learning.

Keywords: Transdisciplinary; Interdisciplinary; Multidisciplinary; Academia; Siloes; Social work

1. Introduction

Given today's "real life" demands on social workers entering the work place, how is traditional academia preparing them? Students now stepping out into the professional arena are confronting a much different world than that which their predecessors and their professors may have experienced in the past. It's an environment dominated with uncertainty, conflicting values and the economic necessity to do more with less. Current social work education appears not to be without great value, but how is it evolving to meet the challenges of today's cross disciplinary work culture? The contemporary social worker is often being asked to work towards common goals that are often too arduous to solve solely within the scope of social work practice.

¹M.S.W., Eric Albers Ph. D, M.S.W., University of Nevada, Reno 1664 N. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89557-0090. Email: cbroersma@frontier.com, Telephon: (775) 901-3265, Fax: (775) 784-4573

This requires they not only have a firm grasp of conventional social work skills, but also have another skill set: one that equips them with proficiency to cross disciplinary lines and build interconnected relationships with other professions. Within academia, experts from varying fields are calling for a new workforce of members who retain their own refined disciplinary knowledge but also have the capacity to traverse disciplinary thinking and thus be effective in authentic life situations that address complicated human dilemmas (Hyun, 2011; McClam & Flores-Scott, 2012; Steiner & Posch, 2006). World-wide, authorities from diverse disciplines are coming to the same conclusion: Addressing significant problems and coming up with enduring answers requires the development of cross-disciplinary teaching, learning, and research approaches (Belsky, 2002; Fry, 2001; Klein, 2004; Tress & Tress, 2001; Woods & Snyder, 2009).

Today's social work university educators have the unique opportunity to be at the forefront of addressing this issue. Already, their students are trained in a multitude of theoretical frameworks to facilitate communication and change among a vast array of systems. The very Masters of Social Work competencies that are core to the profession imply possessing these skills by the identified tasks they measure proficiency of. Yet when it comes to the actual infusion of this component into social work education at the academic level, its implementation into curricula is ill-defined and not always clearly apparent. The functional problem is academic disciplines throughout university campuses are commonly siloed departments, which pretentiously stand separate from other disciplines in the academic setting. The resulting "gap" in educational services for students is not unlike other common undertakings in social work, except this time it is within the academic source of our profession. With this in mind, this study explores the case of a social work student completing an advanced social work degree and practicum conveyed concurrently through two divergent instructional methods: tradition and transdisciplinary education.

Because terms like interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary are often used interchangeably according to Dyer (2003) and Choi & Pak (2006), clarifying each will hopefully provide a better understanding of this study. These terms can be envisioned as on a continuum of disciplinary models. On one end you have the traditional or uni-disciplinary mode. Typically, this is the way most university education is delivered. A single discipline involves a unique and discrete study area with respective history, method, and content (Park & Son, 2010).

To characterize this manner of training, traditional disciplined education is subject and/or topic driven. The students' identity is the knowledge receiver and the teachers' identity is knowledge deliverer(Park & Son, 2010).

Moving next along the continuum is the multidisciplinary mode. Choi & Pak (2006), who conducted an extensive literature review of these terms proposed the definition of the term multidisciplinary as drawing on knowledge from different disciplines but staying within the boundaries of those fields. The multidisciplinary method has a very basic level of other disciplinary involvement and consists more of sharing communication than collaborative problem solving(Park & Son, 2010).

Interdisciplinarity moves from that model as it focuses more on collaboration and interactions between disciplines. Within interdisciplinary practice exists a presence of analysis, synthesis, and harmony linking disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole(Choi & Pak, 2006). Participants learn about and from each other (Wilson&Pirrie, 2000).As noted by Rosenfield(1992) and looking at it from a collaboration research perspective, researchers work jointly but still from [a] disciplinary-specific basis to address a common problem (p.1351).

The transdisciplinary model sits on the furthest end of the spectrum. In reference to human health, Soskolne (2000), explains that transdisciplinary approaches to human health are defined as approaches that integrate the natural, social, and health sciences in a humanities context, and in so doing transcend each of their traditional boundaries. He goes further noting that emergent concepts and methods are the hallmark of the transdisciplinary effort (Soskolne, 2000). In transdisciplinary learning, the student's identity is knowledge producer and the teacher's identity is interactive learning designer, placing it in stark contrast to traditional or uni-discipline learning at the other end of the spectrum(Park & Son, 2010). Characteristically and true in this study, transdisciplinary practice involves various representation from relevant disciplines, stakeholders, non-scientists and non-academic participants(Choi & Pak, 2006). This approach goes beyond multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary models as it combines individuals from multiple disciplines working collaboratively on a common problem who develop a shared conceptual framework. It combines interdisciplinary with a participatory approach and can generate new knowledge and theory(Park & Son, 2010).

It is a science and art of discovering bridges, interconnectedness, and interdependence among different areas of knowledge including the hard, social, and applied sciences (Hyun, 2011). Employing role fluidity, a key feature of this model, allows for a melding of expertise across a team. Members move beyond the confines of their own discipline and take on the perspective of other disciplines (Vigil, Wedell, Ryst & Marson, 2013). Team members transcend from a disciplinary perspective where there may be only one right answer to a holistic perspective where there may be several right answers or even a discovery that perhaps they are asking the wrong question.

2. Practicum Background

The student was admitted to an advanced generalist master of social work program after completing an undergraduate degree in social work. For a one year period, she carried an average of 16 credits per semester of traditional social work study while concurrently participating in a practicum that utilized a transdisciplinary model. The transdisciplinary setting was a leadership education in neurodevelopmental disabilities program in which the student represented the discipline of social work on a team comprised of members from various academic fields of study. Other disciplines included physical therapy, child psychiatry, pediatric dentistry, education, special education, behavioral analysis, speech pathology, nutrition, school psychology and parents of children with neurodevelopmental disabilities. As a team, students and professionals from these various areas joined together to work on significant community and statewide projects for improving the health of children with neurodevelopmental disabilities. They also participated in advanced trainings around autism, including its assessment, diagnosis, impact, and treatment. The experience provided an opportunity to gather a student based perception, comparing and contrasting the traditional and the transdisciplinary approaches to social work education. Insights collected through a series of discussions brought important truths to light about traditional social work academic practice and raised thought-provoking questions. The following is a first-hand account by the student of her training experience.

3. Case Study

The traditional/transdisciplinary educational experience could best be described as, walking in two worlds.

The traditional educational portion provided essential knowledge and supplied a structured foundation of social work skills. Yet, the transdisciplinary portion generated fundamental changes in my thinking and approach for taking those skills into today's real-life social work practice. The addition of transdisciplinary curriculum to typical social work education has significantly impacted my views of social work and its' effective practice. Chiefly, my approach to navigating problem solving, collaboration, and conflict resolution has dramatically shifted. The key factors involved are an elevated focus on persons from other disciplines as professional partners, the importance of relationship building not only within, but also outside of common channels, and a heightened value for utilizing the distinct expertise inherent to other helping professionals. My understanding of how social work complements other fields and plays a vital role in improving health outcomes has increased, while I believe professionals from other disciplines expanded their awareness of the role of social work and the expansive areas members from this field are trained in through the reciprocal exposure.

In alternating between the two "worlds," an overall contradictory context of the two environments became apparent. It appeared that traditional social work education was well preparing me for idyllic practice, but in the transdisciplinary setting I found it provided little effectual training to form collaborative frameworks across other disciplines to address the complexity of modern-day issues. It seemed that in traditional classes, educators spoke of collaboration but failed to practice it even within their own academic setting providing no real collaborative standard to serve as a model. On a campus that prepares several disciplines of helping professionals, none of my traditional social work courses infused complementary professional education into coursework. Through discussions with other disciplined professionals on the transdisciplinary team, it was revealed as not simply a social work department problem, but as one that pervades much of the university system.

In an effort to capture the contradictory contextual environments of the traditional vs. transdisciplinary education approaches as I perceived them, the following table is offered. It outlines my interpretation of the distinctions in each learning milieu and the norms inherent to each training form. I present it in this way to illuminate some of the major differences, but also to provide some consideration of how each might support different outcomes.

3.1 Table Student Based Comparison of Traditional and Transdisciplinary Educational Approaches to Social Work Training	
Traditional Education	Transdisciplinary Education
Walk behind me approach	Walk beside me approach
Assigned mentor within discipline	Assigned mentor outside discipline
Group work (problem solving) with like-minded students within discipline	Group work (problem solving) with various disciplines requiring learning of other disciplined approaches, teaching of ones' own discipline perspective, and putting the client and/or issue first for consensus decision making.
Instructor/faculty directs; Students determine what the instructor is after and produce accordingly	Instructor/faculty participates; Students and faculty brainstorm to formulate novel approaches and produce innovation
Faculty/student roles are conventional and fixed	Faculty practices role fluidity to enhance sharing of perspectives, knowledge and skills; and to encourage synergy
Students develop heightened discipline specific knowledge	Students retain heightened discipline specific knowledge, but expand their understanding and respect for other disciplines
Discipline ethnocentrism	Interdisciplinary reliance
Collaboration involves working with "others"	Collaboration involves deriving shared meaning and complementary cooperation

Participating in the two models of education exposed troubling areas of weakness in traditional education. Two of them are so important that I felt the need to write this critique. The first is a lack of knowledge surrounding the rudimentary expertise, values, training, and theory of other helping professionals due to discipline segregation. And the second, possibly resulting from the first, is unchecked stereotypical thinking about other disciplines. This was an issue I observed in traditional social work classes on several occasions. Sometimes students displayed a lack of awareness concerning other professions that might serve as an assistive or collective resource. More concerning, there were occasions when discussion regarding other professional disciplines came up in class conversation and prejudiced statements such as, "they [doctors] have a God complex" or "they [behaviorists] are dog trainers" were made.

In the education of professional social workers, where being unbiased is so central to the training, it became apparent that the area of professional bias in formative social worker development is being overlooked. Because various disciplines are traditionally provided no structured basis to gain knowledge about each other, impressions can be inaccurate and/or based on stereotypical thinking, which unaddressed may play out from academia and beyond. The clear issue is that as our occupational field is evolving becoming broader and more composite, yet higher education is still practicing in disciplined isolation. Thus many students entering practice begin with little understanding of how professionals from other disciplines might be a cooperative resource. More concerning, they may harbor false beliefs or notions about other helping professionals that persist into career performance, standing as a built-in barrier to successful collaboration.

In transdisciplinary training, meaningful time is devoted to confronting and dispelling these stereotypes through student as discipline expert reciprocal education. The person as professional environment necessitates mutual learning of other disciplined approaches and uncovers common bridges. Students from various disciplines work as team members on complex projects that require resourcefulness, which helps to define roles and build interdependence. Instead of emphasizing differences and distracting from the process of client centered problem solving, the transdisciplinary training embeds respect for what other disciplines have to offer and creates an innovative environment capitalizing on the prospect of what they can do united. Each team member holds sophisticated knowledge in his/her own discipline and combines it with professional humility. The consequence of the rich diversity produces an atmosphere of originality and novelty that heightens the group's ability to overcome obstacles and develop multifaceted plans that realistically undertake the complicated dilemmas social workers and society face today.

To be clear, I found my traditional social work education indispensable as it initially supplied the disciplined immersion that is needed to become a competent social work practitioner and to have the proficiency to independently represent the role of social worker on a transdisciplinary team. But in my opinion, it is needlessly limited because it is occurring in rigid isolation. Participating in a transdisciplinary program provided an opportunity to grow outside the bounds of traditional social work education but likely more in line with what solving problems requires in actual practice.

It made me question if traditional education is underpreparing students for the realities of today's shifting role of social workers? It also left me asking, could aspects of the transdisciplinary approach be infused into traditional education to correct this deficit? In closing, it is not my intention to criticize the many talented teaching professionals that I undoubtedly benefited from, but instead to support the continued advancement of social work education and its' undertaking to strengthen the profession of social work.

4. Discussion

According to Nash (2008), there is relatively little known empirically about transdisciplinary training. While this single case is not generalizable, it seems plausible that there is enough face validity to the students' argument that it warrants serious examination. Are we underpreparing students for the realities of today's shifting role of social workers? Does traditional education overlook the need to foster mutual respect and knowledge of the skills and abilities of other helping professionals, thus inadvertently maintaining professional stereotyping? Could the infusion of transdisciplinarity move social workers from facilitators to innovators? Perhaps most importantly, we should ask is this an isolated instance or not. Literature suggests not and confirms the existence of interprofessional stereotypes and of perceived status differences (Barnes, Carpenter & Dickinson, 2000). Moreover, there is interprofessional rivalry, tribalism and stereotypes that are known to exist within healthcare professions and detract from effective health delivery (Mandy, Milton & Mandy, 2004). On the other hand, studies have shown that when interprofessional groups of students learned with, from and about each other in the classroom and practice settings there were positive alterations to health care education students' perceptions of various professions (Ateah et al., 2011; Hean, Clark, Adams, Humphris, & Lathlean, 2006; Lindqvist, Duncan, Shepstone, Watts & Pearce, 2005).

Given the progressive nature of social work education and its ongoing resolve to prepare its students to meet true-to-life conditions, this issue calls for impartial assessment in the face of the accusation of perpetuating professional bias, and the core defensiveness such an accusation promotes. This study presents controversial questions and implies a need for additional research on this subject due to its proposal for an adjustment to current academics. That in itself brings several questions to mind. Principally, if, when, and how could transdisciplinary education be introduced? Should it be interspersed throughout the entire program or only after a student has fully formed a disciplined social work identity? Could curricula for synchronous ethical case based learning with various helping professionals be developed.

What barriers exist among the existing academic establishment, licensing boards, and accreditation bodies? Clearly, such an issue involves careful consideration.

Answering the appeal to address professional bias and interdisciplinary awareness through more transdisciplinarity in academia would no doubt require a pragmatic shift of traditional academic philosophy, but moreover it would require a commitment from social work leaders to overcome university fragmentation. That being said, the theoretical and skill base of social work may make social work faculty one of the most qualified disciplines to tackle such an issue.

To quote Golden (2011) in the article titled, *Coordination, integration, and collaboration: a clear path for social work in health care reform*, "Social workers have the power and potential to build and influence the creation of an ideal health care delivery system--a collaborative system of care based on a continuum of services that is both integrated and coordinated, cuts across the payment silos, and has the older adult and the family at its center (p.228)."

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article suggests the possible benefit of infusing transdisciplinary learning into traditional social work education. It implies that it may be an effective way to address professional bias and interdisciplinary awareness and thereby improve a students' ability to effectively function in collaboration across disciplines. It recommends educational program reflection and self-examination in these areas, suggesting a need for more research of this subject. The article by no means insinuates that traditional social work education is inadequate. Instead it points out areas that are problematic across all of academia that social work might be exceptionally qualified to be at the forefront of improving.

6. References

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