

HANDOUT 1

KENT SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

CURRICULUM DESCRIPTION

August 2007

Mission

The Kent School of Social Work seeks to prepare well-qualified social workers who practice from a strong professional value base to serve the metropolitan mission of the university. Our graduates promote social justice through their practices with diverse client systems. In the context of a research institution, Kent School is committed to knowledge development that informs social work practice, recognizing the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration to solve complex social problems.

Kent School Curriculum

Instructional Philosophy

The main premise of the curriculum is to provide students strategies to learn challenging materials, to encourage flexibility in the use of knowledge, and to change the underlying ways of thinking. At the end of their studies students will achieve a deeper, more complex understanding of social work, they will be able to critically evaluate and contemplate the material while experimenting with the flexible application of the knowledge in a variety of contexts. This higher order of thinking that will be developed and promoted with the curriculum is referred to as critical thinking.

This curriculum philosophy responds well to social work as an ever changing and evolving profession which responds to new knowledge on the radically changing needs and demands of society. It is impossible for any curriculum to address each problem or case example social work graduates may face in their practice. Development of cognitive flexibility provides avenues and tools for students to integrate their learning experiences in such a way as to maximize their potential to meet the demands of the profession upon graduation. The curriculum is designed to enhance students' ability to enable the diverse client systems they work with to make decisions that contribute to the quality and health of these client systems. The focus will also be on decisions that promote social justice. The curriculum is designed to graduate professional social workers who think critically about what they do, why they do it, and what outcomes they hope will result from their social work practices.

Critical thinking is defined as "the intellectual disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief or action" (Scriven & Paul, 2004).

Critical thinking includes specific skills such as problem-solving and the ability to integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines and theories of human behavior.

Throughout the curriculum, there is an emphasis on critical reflection, or appraisal of various points of view no matter what the source. The curriculum draws heavily on social science knowledge and integrates this with problem-solving phases such as assessment, intervention, and evaluation. In this respect, the curriculum is designed to teach students to access, integrate, and assess practice and policy related research to solve social problems and to work towards social justice. When critical thinking skills are used effectively, it leads to transparency and promotes social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people.

Bruner's spiral curriculum format (1991) is used to implement the above mentioned cognitive flexibility philosophy in the development of higher order critical thinking skills. With this format, topics are revisited throughout the curriculum, while increasing the level of difficulty, complexity and depth of the area and linking new knowledge or information to previous levels of learning on the same topic to increase the competency of the students. Students will be introduced in the foundation curriculum to different strategies for developing critical thinking. In the advanced curriculum, students will move towards a higher level of complexity in their thinking because they will be required to analyze problems from multiple perspectives (clients, practice wisdom, research), evaluate multiple sources of evidence, and address complex issues and problems incorporating multiple level forces on client systems.

Undergraduate BSW and MSSW Foundation Curriculum

The undergraduate BSW and MSSW foundation curriculum promotes a generalist perspective in which the simultaneous impact of many systemic levels (individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities) on clients' lives is critically analyzed and recognized. The foundation builds upon a liberal arts base that fosters an understanding of society as a complex organization of diverse people and ideas. Social problems are understood as occurring within the nexus of culture, conflict, development, ecology, and systems and as such, efforts to help or intervene must include consideration of these forces. Students will be able to critically identify and assess social problems, specifically attending to 1) how such problems are maintained, 2) how they impact the quality of people's life, 3) a cultural sensitivity and appreciation of marginalized people, and 4) how to actively promote social and economic justice. In the foundation year, the focus is on the development of critical thinking skills in all the areas mentioned.

MSSW Advanced Curriculum – Advanced Social Work Practice

The advanced curriculum seeks to develop the utilization and application of critical thinking on all levels – in reading professional writing and research, in students' practica, in the classroom, and in the students' own thinking. Consistently monitoring the ethics of their practice, evaluating theoretical principles and epistemologies, and utilizing technological advances become basic practice patterns. Specific skill sets developed include: 1) Creating, organizing and integrating ideas and action for engaging diverse client systems effectively in change; 2) Assessing, conceptualizing and analyzing theoretical, practice and research problems from multiple perspectives and utilizing critical thinking skills to formulate impressions based upon the data; 3) Analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating the evidence available to guide advanced social work practice; 4) Synthesizing, formulating and implementing a plan of action for social work practice that addresses complex issues and problems, builds consensus and

incorporates multiple-level forces on client systems; 5) Analyzing and evaluating data of client progress and outcomes and assessing implications and consequences of this progress and outcomes; 6) Synthesizing, creating, and organizing ideas from theory, research and practice for social justice; and 7) Demonstrating the ability to integrate culturally competent skills into all aspects of social work practice.

These skills will be used to actively pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed client systems. Students will learn how to become leaders in social change efforts focused primarily on issues of health, poverty, discrimination, interpersonal conflict, and other forms of human suffering and social injustice.

To assist graduates in their future professional careers, these skills are organized around three practice foci: 1) children and families, 2) health and mental health, and 3) community and international practice. These domains give opportunity for students to focus on clustered learning within the context of these fields of practice. Recognizing that the employment of students after graduation is often a function of geography and personal circumstance, the school allows students the programmatic option of combining interests among focus areas.

While curricular options do exist for students to develop a certain subject-matter expertise, the recognition of the School that it needs to prepare students more broadly places the principal focus of the concentration work on high-level critical thinking about social work engagement and also on the translational knowledge and skills that support the graduates' movement from one field of practice to another. Once students learn how to learn and how to think about social work practices, and they understand the components of ethical practice and the responsibility to increase specific field-of-practice expertise, they will be better equipped to practice in a world where knowledge changes and transforms what we do on a rapidly accelerating curve.