Abstract

Providing students voices with opportunities to share in classroom interaction is important and valuable. In this article I discuss my integration of assigned “interludes” which required students in an Introduction to Social Work course to give brief oral presentations of three types: identification of role models for the profession of social work; explanation of an excerpt from The Canadian Encyclopedia of Social Work (Turner, 2005); and a critique of an image of social workers found in any type of media. Through written feedback students provide insights into the value of this teaching method as well as suggestions for improving the process.


In the process of designing any course, an important challenge is the diversification of teaching methods in order to avoid continuous lecturing by the professor. For some time now, the value of student participation in the teaching and learning process has been recognized as essential to a quality classroom experience (Erickson, 2007; Weisner, 2004) and the ways in which a teacher invites students to participate is limited only by the imagination. Establishing an effective balance between the student and teacher’s voices can pose yet another challenge (Patterson, 2000). Too much time allotted to student participation in each class can potentially disallow a sufficient amount of instructor time for interpreting and disseminating content relative to the course. In the research described in this article, I applied a new teaching strategy which provides students with more class time listening to the voices of their classmates and I engaged my students in an assessment of its effectiveness.

In June, 2006, I taught an Introductory Social Work course which is required for students registered in a Bachelor of Social Work degree program. I experimented with a teaching approach that required every student to take
responsibility for three “interludes”, or oral presentations intended to ensure students would continue to be engaged and interested throughout the day. I intended to explore the degree to which students valued opportunities to hear from other students, whether the quality of their learning experience would be enhanced, and if one of the three types of speaking opportunities would receive more positive feedback than another.

Three different types of presentations were assigned: The first was selecting an entry from the *Canadian Encyclopedia of Social Work* by Frank Turner. Students borrowed this book, browsed through it, and freely selected any entry to present to the class along with a relevant question or comment. The reason for this choice was to nudge them to gain familiarity with the book as a resource for future academic work and to inspire students with the range of areas in which social work has involvement.

The second was an “image of social work” that had appeared in a book, movie or conversation, an assessment of the accuracy of the portrayal, some insight into how it may have developed, and a reflection about changing and responding to inaccurate images about the profession. One of my goals in assigning this was to lay the foundation for using critical thinking skills and to prompt discussion of reasons why what the public or media perception about a given situation is often different from the perspective of social workers involved in cases because of the nature of the work where confidentiality is of the utmost importance.

The third was identification of an individual who reflects social work values or ideals, and who the student recognizes as a role model, with my goal being to mutually inspire class members through their own stories of amazing people whose role modeling provided them with strength and courage.

Completing each interlude gave the student 5% toward their course mark. More specific criteria were not provided intentionally, to encourage variety and creativity in the work. Full marks were awarded for having completed each of the three presentations; they were not assessed according to evaluative criteria.

Possession of a prior Bachelor’s degree is a requirement for this program, thus students held a certain level of maturity and confidence in the academic context,
although most did not know one another beforehand and this was their first course in the program. The course was taught in the month of June in an intensive, full day format (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.) which was a factor that motivated me to seek ways to change the daily routine and provide varied activities for class members. The class was composed of only 15 students and this small number was obviously a key factor in experimenting with this type of teaching method and assignment; the larger the class, the less time one has to provide students with opportunities to do individual oral presentations.

On the final day of the course, as standard University evaluations were distributed, I also invited students to anonymously complete another evaluation form which was placed in a sealed envelope and left with the Departmental Assistant until all grades had been submitted. All 15 students chose to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire asked for responses to the following questions:

- As the student presenting each of these “interludes”, did you find any of the three more valuable or interesting to prepare than one or two of the others? If so, please explain which you appreciated doing the most.
- As a student listening to the interludes of other students, did you find that one type was of greater value than another type? Overall, has the use of interludes been valuable for your learning during this course?
- Students in the class received 5 marks for doing each of their interludes, similar to a participation mark. Would you recommend that the interludes actually be graded rather than marks automatically given for completing them?
- Would you increase their value in terms of marks? If so how much would you make them worth?
- Do you believe some interludes should be worth more marks than others (assuming all three were assigned once again)?

Findings

Responses to the questionnaire have been analyzed under the following headings:
• Value students found in the different types of interludes (the role model, media image and encyclopedia entry) as learning/teaching tools;
• Student feedback with regard to the marks allotted to the interludes and whether grading would be preferable to automatically assigned marks for conducting the interludes;
• Overall suggestions and insights with regard to the impact of the interludes on learning and classroom atmosphere.

1. Student views of the value of the interludes

a. Role model interlude:
The word “inspiring” was often associated with this particular interlude. One described it as “powerful stories about where we are all coming from”. An appreciated benefit was the chance to learn something personal and to provide unique insights about each class member. There was also recognition that disclosing self-knowledge of this more personal nature contributed significantly to group development and the sense of belonging to this specific group.

Another interesting comment was that hearing who had inspired each student to become a social worker gave cause to reflect “why we were all here”. Several commented that it appeared other students particularly enjoyed sharing who their role model or inspiration was.

b. Image of the profession interlude:
Amidst the expressed appreciation for the images of the social work profession interlude there were comments that thinking about how others view the profession and acknowledging how others perceive the roles to be provided helpful insights. Students said it offered the chance to explore ideas about the profession, that it was enjoyable to prepare and share, and that it encouraged thinking about what stereotypes students will face when they venture out into the professional world. The fact that students needed to seek different media images to present the topic was also identified as a significant part of the process.

On the negative side, one student commented that although the “image of social work” interlude was valuable and pertinent, he or she found it became somewhat
repetitive as additional students brought forth negative views held by the public regarding the profession. Another said the image of social work assignment tended to have a fairly narrow scope, thus making it was difficult to not repeat what others had done – especially as the weeks progressed.

c. Encyclopedia excerpt interlude:
One comment on the subject of the Canadian Encyclopedia of Social Work Interlude was that it was the most useful because it offered the chance to learn about topics not touched on in class. For one student, the process of looking through the book and gaining information on topics in all areas of social work stood out as being the most valuable aspect of this interlude. The same individual noted that “you only get what you put into it” thus decided to look over the entire book to “get a feel for it” and this was extremely beneficial to them.

Another concurred with appreciative comments about being required to make a selection from the Encyclopedia, saying she or he enjoyed seeing the “diversity and unexpectedness” of some of the entries in the Encyclopedia; things this person hadn’t previously thought of as being part of social work. Gaining awareness of the connections of different topics to the profession was said to be exciting and encouraging. Others said the Encyclopedia interludes were very educational, informative and automatically and easily initiated great discussions. Through discussions further knowledge was seen to be generated.

The most common comment of appreciation for the Encyclopedia interlude was it invited a delving into many diverse topics that students may not otherwise have had the opportunity to examine.

d. Overall comments regarding use of interludes in the course:
An interesting comment made by one student was that they enjoyed all three types because each provided an opportunity to express the self in three different ways. Another noted the requirement did not generate pressure or stress around making any of the presentations, and a third student liked that there was no time limit.
One student summed up their positive appraisal of the interludes by saying “I think they are all necessary to help us learn about social work, and each other, and to create a welcoming, sharing community within the classroom.”

2. Student views regarding grading of interludes

As already mentioned, for completing each of the three interludes, students were given a total of 15 participation marks. Agreement with assigning grades in this way was nearly unanimous, for several reasons. One noted that since evaluative grading was not going to occur, the guidelines were less specific which enabled students to approach the assignment in different ways. Had each presentation been judged, this student felt grading would have become highly subjective whereas the minimal guidelines required offered room for broader interpretation and thus creativity.

Another student was of the opinion that grading of this assignment (and grading in general) was neither necessary nor desirable because all class members had “worked very, very hard to get to this program. We are all very dedicated academics and future social workers.”

A comment I found particularly noteworthy and worthy of further reflection was: “We would not be as authentic if grades were given.” A related comment was that “…no one feels pressured to ‘out do’ someone else and we all feel free to be ourselves and present our experiences.” The notion of taking away pressure was echoed by other respondents. One student stated that the learning was “significantly more meaningful” because of the absence of judgment and of the pressure generated by grades. This author finds it disappointing – but not necessarily surprising – that the implication is that grading itself creates unwelcome competition and taints the “performance” and topics. One student suggested grading would have created too much stress for people for this particular assignment and “may keep them from discussing more emotional topics”. Another noted that “everyone put in lots of time and effort. Grading them is too arbitrary. I felt less inhibited and freer in my own presentation of the interludes than I would if I knew a grade was riding on them.” Repeated in different ways was the belief that the format was more
conducive to a relaxed team focused environment and that “a grade would only foster competition and hinder group bonding in the early stages”.

On the topic of the actual percentage value given (5% for each of the three interludes), it appears students were satisfied with equal assignment of marks among the three, and most (12/15) recommended leaving the 15% total as it was. A rationale proposed by one student was that “People have strengths in different areas. If the goal of the interludes is to enhance learning then each interlude should be valued equally.” While variance in the type of contribution to learning different interludes offered was acknowledged, the fact that “some individuals are more emotional and others more intellectual” was seen as positive and as providing additional support for maintaining an equal value for each interlude.

A sole advocate for giving higher marks for the description of a role model interlude made the suggestion “because it can leave students feeling vulnerable and giving a piece of themselves instead of researching and giving back the information”. The suggestion appears to be that asking students to potentially demonstrate vulnerability is deemed worthy of a higher percentage of course marks.

3. Overall comments/suggestions/insights about the use of interludes

Student feedback of a more general nature about the use of interludes provided additional insights into the importance and value of using an “interlude variety pack” in a classroom setting. Comments suggest the interludes play a significant role in contributing to an atmosphere conducive toward effective learning: “I think it helped us get used to talking to the class, got us thinking about social work from a lot of different angles, helped us to know more about each other, and we learned a lot, too. I give them the thumbs up!” In a similar vein, this student wrote: “They build community and acceptance among class members. They help us to discover how we see ourselves as social workers, how others view us (what we will encounter out in the world), and help us to learn more about areas of research we may pursue.”
In addition, the phenomenon of tapping into creativity and challenging self limits was identified as having been accomplished through the assignment. As one put it: “Each (interlude) had a basic challenge that I faced and given these were the first presentations we had to do before the entire class it was initially difficult.” Being required to present in front of the group was identified as very challenging by some, yet in the same breath one respondent commented that “any additional ones would be welcomed”.

A note of gratitude was expressed by a student who said: “I really enjoyed/appreciated the work all my classmates put into these activities. It gave me a better sense of my abilities as well as their own.” The most enthusiastic of respondents wrote: “I loved the interludes! They were a great idea and I’m so glad you chose to include them. They were very fun to do and to present, and I feel I learned so much I might not have thought of otherwise.” Another student went so far as to recommend using the same format in other classes because the interludes encourage participation, openness, and discussion.

**Discussion**

Conducting this research study has provided a valuable opportunity for reflection on this teaching experiment. Students’ comments in this course revealed that in this course, being required “to talk about our influences and experiences” through the interludes was recognized as something that in their view occurs less often in other faculties.

Feedback helpfully indicated that holding the presentations at different times during the day was considered enjoyable and “kept me looking forward to them”. One valuable suggestion that surfaced was the notion of setting a time limit at the very beginning and establishing a 10 minute maximum for presentation and discussion, “so that they don’t take up too much time and make completing class work difficult”. I concur with this opinion, although some students appreciated there being few parameters around the assignments. Another fair critique was that “…sometimes there seemed to be a squeeze to get them in” followed by the suggestion “Maybe students could choose 2 of 3 to present and hand in a written form of the 3rd (or omit) to save on time.” This
will be a valuable idea for the next time I am using the interlude approach. Students were given freedom in the dates to present their interludes; a schedule of class days was provided and signups were invited according to student preference. While this respected students’ personal scheduling and task management preferences, it also impinged slightly on what might have been a more ideal balancing of learning activities on some days.

A primary reason for offering triple occasions for students to do brief individual presentations was my desire to infuse energy into a schedule of day-long classes, that inherently risked being long and drawn out, at a time of year when few would choose to be indoors. Yet an ongoing fear is that I may have gone “overboard” in offering up too much time for student sharing and not enough for my own facilitation and sharing of content. The following comment which succinctly captures what seems to be consensus about the value of these interludes also underlines the cause for my anxiety in relation to the degree to which I have been adequately available and responsible in sharing knowledge in the classroom:

“I think that so far, the interludes are as helpful to me in this class as our following discussion and classroom group work and assignments. Because we get to delve into a small snippet of information about so many different topics, like creativity and the Cree healing theory, we’re able to get so many more perspectives about things that we may not have otherwise had the opportunity to hear about.”

On the one hand, I am pleased to read the affirmation that the interludes were indeed of great value to student learning. On the other hand, I question whether the other course assignments that also involve teaching and learning, which are graded and worth much more than these participatory assignments should not clearly be more “helpful” than these brief student presentations. In the future, I would like to examine how “snippet” teaching/learning moments can become incorporated into larger assignments in order that the articulated value, significance and contributions of these types of “interlude” activities can have a more dominant status in the learning experience of the student.
References


