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School of Social Work

2007

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Teaching and Learning Social Work Practice Skills through the Use of Triads

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*This article presents a structured way to teach and learn social work practice skills in an undergraduate or foundation practice class. Triads provide the opportunity for students to develop practice skills and confidence as they experience firsthand the role of a social work practitioner. Written from both the perspective of the instructor and the student, this article examines how triads can be used to teach, apply, and reinforce skills in each of seven areas of the problem-solving model: engagement, assessment, planning/contracting, intervention, evaluation, closing, and follow-up, with additional opportunity given to applying skills related to social work values, ethics, and diversity. . The article discusses confidentiality and dual relationships as they relate to this teaching method and the risks and challenges to the use of this approach for both instructor and student.*

**Keywords:** *triads, social work practice, problem-solving model, confidentiality, dual relationships, experiential learning*

A solid foundation of generalist practice skills is critical for social work students. It is one thing for students to learn about these skills in the classroom, but quite another for them to put these skills into action in their practicum or place of employment. Adult learning models show the critical role of experiential learning in anchoring content learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; MacKeracher, 2004). Langer (2002) asserts,  "If you rely solely on verbally conveyed methods of giving information, it is unlikely that adults will learn" (p. 897). Experiential learning "represents a shift away from didactic teaching in which students make few decisions about their learning and assume a relatively passive role as consumers within a framework that promotes dependence on their teachers" (Gibbons & Gray, 2002, p. 537). For adults, learning happens best in the context of life experiences. The nearer learning is to the "real world," the more quickly and efficiently students will learn. Simulations and role plays help students to overcome those first uncertain steps towards professionalization of skills. Experiential activities also have a powerful effect on students' attitudes (Anderson & Harris, 2005; Horwath & Thurlow, 2004; Quinn, 1999; Schuldberg, 2005). Askeland (2003) expands on adult and experiential learning with the concept of confluent learning. Confluent learning merges the intellectual, emotional, and psychomotor aspects of learning. "Learning evokes feelings and bodily reactions, even when only facts and information are conveyed" (Askeland, 2003, p. 357).

In order  for students to prepare for practicum and for careers as social work practitioners, they need a safe and structured setting to develop critical practice skills such as active listening, empathic responding, and goal-setting. Practice simulations allow students to translate newly gained knowledge into practice. Students' skills increase dramatically along with their self-confidence when they are given the opportunity to apply and practice new skills in a safe and

structured setting, and to reflect critically on their growth as budding practitioners. Students appreciate the direct connection between course content, application, and assessment.

This article presents a structured, promising way to teach and learn social work practice skills in an undergraduate or foundation practice course. This course, Social Work Practice I, is offered as a first-semester course for social work majors and is placed one to two semesters prior to their first social work practicum. Drawing from the problem-solving, systems, ecological, and interactional models, students gain generalist practice knowledge and skills through class lectures and discussions, triad experiences, instructor feedback, and textbook readings (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006).

In this article, the teaching side of this endeavor is written by an instructor, while the learning side is written by a small sample of undergraduate students who have experienced this approach to learning. Students volunteered to participate, and were then chosen by the instructor based on their ability to reflect critically on the use of triads in their learning of social work practice skills. Text from the instructor's perspective is written as regular text, while text from the student's perspective is indented. This multi-perspective approach allows for a fuller understanding of triads as a unique and powerful teaching method. This article examines how triads can be used to teach, apply, and reinforce skills in each of seven areas of the problem-solving model: engagement, assessment, planning/contracting, intervention, evaluation, closing, and follow-up, with additional opportunity given to apply skills related to social work values, ethics, and diversity. Confidentiality and dual relationships are discussed as they relate to this teaching method. The article concludes with a discussion of the risks and challenges to the use of this approach for both instructor and student.

Although the teaching and learning of practice skills may be paramount to social work education, a search of the recent literature on this important area produced surprisingly few results. Askeland (2003) wrote about the use of "reality-play" as a type of experiential learning to help students integrate theory and practice. Similar to the triad experience presented here, Askeland proposes the use of students' own real-life challenges. Several articles were published in the 1980s (Doelcker & Bedics, 1987; Faherty, 1983; Wodarski & Kelly, 1987), but very few have appeared since then. Rubin, Franklin, and Selber (1992) wrote about the integration of research and practice. In a similar vein, Jackson and Sedehi (1998) wrote about the teaching of direct practice skills as they relate to home visiting and research. The most closely matched project to this current one was done by Linsk and Tunney (1997) who trained health social workers with simulated clients. Feedback was provided by the "clients," peers, and instructors. Their justification for the simulation activities was that it provided students with "the most experiential learning tasks possible outside of an actual clinical situation" (Linsk & Tunney, 1997, p. 474), adding that the preliminary evaluations of these activities were extremely positive.

Overview of Triads

Teaching and learning social work practice skills through the use of triads involves three interlocking steps: preparation, application, and reflection. The first step is preparation. Through assigning readings, and lecturing and modeling in the classroom, the instructor prepares students didactically. Second, students are given the opportunity for application. Students are assigned to triad groups that endure for the semester. These triad groups meet a total of five times. During a triad meeting, students take turns playing the roles of worker, client, and observer. A worker works with the same client for the duration of the semester and carries that client through all steps of the problem-solving model. The final step in the triad learning process is reflection

through critical thinking and writing of papers. The structure of triad meetings and subsequent assignments are outlined here.

*Structure of Triad Meetings*

Each triad group meets five times during the semester. Each meeting lasts about 75 minutes, composed of three 15-minute session rotations followed by 10-minute feedback sessions (see Table 1). In each session, the worker carries her or his client through the step(s) appropriate for that session. The worker is responsible for guiding the session and for trying out new skills. The observer is present but remains separate from the session, observing skills and interactions, and intervening only as the session timekeeper.

The client is asked to share openly and to share a problem that is authentic but not overwhelming or clinically significant. This authenticity of problem allows the client to most easily demonstrate a congruence verbally and nonverbally as well as a consistency in content between sessions. The instructor must give the student-clients adequate guidance in the selection of problems to bring to the triad experience, and must be available to meet with students as they consider what problem to share with their worker. Typical problems that student-clients present to their student-workers include time management; stress related to balancing academic and/or employment responsibilities; and family, peer, or roommate relationships. While workers are encouraged to conduct a multidimensional assessment, a form is not provided, as it might lead them to ask more questions than are necessary. In the 15 minutes allotted to complete both the engagement and assessment stages and the number of skills they must demonstrate, student-clients do not have the time to get into weighty issues. The limited time period of 15 minutes in each of the five sessions helps to protect clients with significant issues from going too deep into their issues and limits the time in which they must keep their boundaries up, if necessary.

The holding of the triad meetings are best held during class time. The instructor needs to find a physical space large enough for triad groups to sit together and yet not be able to overhear distinct conversations from surrounding groups. A possible location is a large auditorium with folding chairs to allow students flexible seating, so that workers and clients may sit comfortably and the observer may be able to observe and hear, but not be directly involved. The instructor may also locate two adjacent classrooms that are available the few times that triads are held. During the triad meeting, the instructor should be physically present in the room to observe interactions and to be available to answer questions and/or respond to difficult situations that may arise. At the end of the triad meeting, triad groups check in with the instructor to give and receive feedback, to process any potential problem areas, and to discuss questions or issues that come up during the session. Whenever this instructor has allowed or required students to find their own physical place and time to hold triads, numerous problems have surfaced. Therefore, holding triads during class time in a physical space reserved by the instructor for this activity is highly encouraged.

If the class size is small and confidentiality is upheld, processing the triad sessions in class can be a very powerful component of the learning experience. Facilitated class discussions promote vicarious learning and provide universality to student's experiences. The triad experience is often an intense and memorable one for students. Debriefing in class is a valuable aid in getting every ounce of learning out of this powerful experience while also assisting the instructor in detecting any trouble spots.

Student absences are strongly discouraged, but inevitable. The instructor must handle absences in a way that does not increase the negative effect of dual relationships nor the level of anxiety or intensity often experienced with triads. The instructor should offer to help the triad

members to communicate with one another, to find a time and place that is suitable for meeting outside of class, and offer flexibility in due dates.

*Assignments*

Prior to each triad meeting, the instructor provides specific skills for the worker to work on during their session. The instructor also provides feedback sheets for the client and observer to complete (handwritten) that are specific to the session and aimed at helping the worker identify strengths and weaknesses (see Appendices A and B). Specific questions on the feedback sheets help students to focus their observation skills and remind them to offer constructive criticism to the worker. Throughout the course, the instructor may need to remind clients and observers to be more attentive and specific in their feedback. The instructor has the opportunity to model the provision of honest and constructive feedback through comments written on assignments as well as in giving examples in class.

Another important benefit of the client feedback sheet is the opportunity for the student-client to reflect on what it may feel like to be a client. This feedback, coming from multiple sources, is very valuable for students as part of their learning. This information can be difficult to obtain in real life as clients often lack the courage or the opportunity to give honest feedback to their workers. As supported by Linsk and Tunney (1997), "The immediate feedback component of practice simulation allows the student practitioner, in a safe context, to reflect on practice experience in partnership with the client, the instructor, and the rest of the class" (p. 475). Participating in guided feedback in this manner also prepares students for supervisory roles, particularly in the giving of constructive feedback.

In the 1 to 2 weeks following each triad meeting, the Worker submits a three- to five-page paper reflecting on specific skills demonstrated, strengths and weaknesses, and feelings

related to the process and growth (see Appendix C). **[au: insert intro words here One student wrote,]**

> I enjoyed writing the reflection papers because they forced me to critically examine the triad sessions. I probably would not have done this if I had not had to write the paper. By writing the papers, I had to focus on specific skills, such as empathy or "tuning in," and how or if I used them. Also, when writing the papers, I could look back on the session and see what I did well. The comment sheets that the client and observer completed also helped me to see what I had done well. I feel that the reflection papers are very important tools to show where growth is occurring and where changes need to be made.

At the end of the semester, students write a final paper to show how they applied each of the problem-solving steps and how they demonstrated social work ethics. The final paper gives students the opportunity to take a comprehensive view of the whole process and to critique how the problem-solving model might work in a job or practicum. Students are encouraged to use portions of the papers they have written throughout the semester, incorporating instructor feedback and new insights gained in hindsight.

> **[intro here and in all other quotes A student reflected,]**Writing the final paper provided me with the opportunity to recognize how much I had grown throughout the triad process. I read through all of the prior reflection papers, and I could see things that I had problems with at first that I could now do flawlessly, such as initiating a conversation with the client. I also realized how the problem-solving steps work together to create a means for change. Taken individually, they do not seem to do much, but by rereading the reflection papers I had written after each session, I was able to see how the steps worked together to promote change.

*Role of the Instructor*

The instructor must fill many roles in leading students through the triad experience: teacher, facilitator, organizer, and supervisor, to name a few. Students rely on the teacher to provide instruction and structure to step them through the triad experience from beginning to end. As discussed earlier, the instructor guides students in selecting the problem to present to their worker, provides feedback, and intervenes, when necessary. When students venture into problems that are deeper than they are prepared to handle and/or struggle with dual relationships (discussed later), the instructor must take on the role of clinical supervisor in setting clear boundaries in order to protect the clients and to promote learning.

The instructor's ability to model skills that the students are expected to demonstrate is extremely important. This modeling happens in the classroom through teaching and facilitating of class discussions as well as one-on-one as the instructor provides guidance, encouragement, and supervision to students. The instructor who projects confidence and always believes in the growth potential of students will inspire the students to attempt new skills and to grow in their professional role as a social worker. The instructor should strive to project a spirit of collaboraion as students must use their new knowledge and practice skills to respond to the inevitable ebbs and flows of relationship-building and problem solving with clients. Through carefully crafted feedback and class discussion, the instructor can encourage students to reflect thoughtfully on their experiences.

Once the flurry of feedback sheets and assignments hits, the instructor will understand the need for organization. The instructor often needs to provide quick turnaround on the grading of assignments so that students can receive feedback before entering the next triad. An important challenge for the instructor is to grade students on their sincere efforts, as students sometimes

flounder when trying new roles and skills. It is a balancing act for the instructor to expect the best from students while also allowing them to make mistakes and try again.

<div align="center">Teaching/Learning the Problem-Solving Model</div>

This section shows how triads can be used to teach, apply, and reinforce skills in each of seven areas of the problem-solving model: engagement, assessment, planning/contracting, intervention, evaluation, closing, and follow-up. Each section includes instructor and student remarks.

*Engagement*

An important task to be accomplished during engagement is the establishment of a professional relationship between the worker and client. The Worker must learn to greet his/her client appropriately, demonstrate effective attending skills, discuss agency services and client expectations, offer services, and orient the client to the helping process (see Appendix D). **A student recalled,**

The engagement section made me the most nervous because it was the first time I met with my client. I was unsure of what to say or how to accomplish the goals of the session. When engaging a client, I was aware that I was acting as a professional so I had to conduct myself in a different manner than I would if I was interacting with a friend. I learned that engagement sets the foundation for an effective working relationship where trust can be built and helping and healing can occur.

*Assessment*

  Assessment involves "acquiring an understanding of a problem, what causes it, and what can be changed to minimize or resolve it" (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, Jr., 2006, p. 142). Through the triads, students can learn the importance and fluidity of assessment. In their rush to resolve problems, students often discount this step and find themselves having to revisit assessment later. The triad also helps students to experience firsthand the importance of conducting a multidimensional assessment and they can see how the multiple systems of clients interact and influence one another. While students may appreciate a more straightforward assessment form, I prefer to provide the framework in class and let students think through what they want to know about their clients and figure out how they will ask their client for this information (see Appendix D). **A student said,**

    I tried to ask as many questions about my client's problem as possible so that I could gain

    a complete understanding of her situation, but I learned that I could not get a complete

    understanding of the situation by just asking questions. As our relationship developed and

    we began to work on her problem, I discovered that I did not know as much about the

    problem as I thought I did. I learned that my client is the expert on her situation, and I am

    only an observer. As I learned about the systems perspective, I learned about the

    importance of a multidimensional assessment, but I did not realize this until we were in a

    later stage of the helping process. During assessment, it was challenging to listen to my

    client without offering advice.

*Planning/Contracting*

In the planning and contracting stage of the Generalist Intervention Model, a worker partners with his or her client in defining the problem, prioritizing needs, establishing goals and objectives, and specifying action steps. A critical step within this stage is to formulate a contract, which students can choose to be written, verbal, or implied. A sample contract can be provided in class, but students need to be given the leeway to adapt the contract to their perceived needs (see Appendix E). **A student reflected,**

> The planning and contracting phase truly encouraged me to act like a professional. This
>
> stage truly made me act like a professional because I worked on forming a contract with
>
> my client, which is something that I would never do with a friend. When working
>
> together with my client to set the goals and objectives for a contract, I faced some
>
> problems. I did not use a written contract but used an implied oral contract, and this did
>
> not work for my client. I also did not work with my client to formulate specific goals and
>
> objectives. This provided me with a good learning experience on the pros and cons of
>
> contracts and the appropriate ways to form them with clients.

*Implementation*

Having completed the stages of engagement, assessment, and planning and contracting, the student is invited to work on implementation. At this point in the semester, I find it helpful to introduce students to the idea of "tuning in" to yourself prior to the session, and to your client at the beginning of the session (Shulman, 2006). Embracing client ambivalence is an important part of the helping relationship. I encourage students to engage with their client's "first offering," but also to practice their deepening skills (Shulman, 2006). Students are presented with specific elaborating skills and challenged to try them out in the session. In the classroom, students hear

about the special challenges presented by involuntary clients, hard-to-reach clients, or clients in

crisis, and how they must adapt their skills to work with these kinds of clients. In the triad,

workers are invited to consider whether their client reflects the characteristics of any of these

kinds of clients and whether they can stretch their skills to meet the unique needs of this client.

Relying on the power of empathy in engaging with a client and resolving client's problems are

often especially difficult for students to do (see Appendix F). **One student shared her thoughts**

**and feelings on this stage.**

> I felt overwhelmed as I entered the triad session where I was to engage in the intervention
>
> with my client. I was trying to remember everything that we had studied in our social
>
> work practice course so that I could directly apply it to my client's situation. I soon
>
> realized that this approach to the intervention was not going to be effective because
>
> instead of focusing on the problem at hand, I was reviewing course outlines and
>
> suggestions. Instead, I began to review what we had covered in previous triad sessions
>
> (specifically in the planning and contracting sessions) in order to bring a focus to our time
>
> together. I listened more carefully to what my client was saying and her feelings and
>
> attitude on that specific day so that I could further focus our intervention plan. Although I
>
> was not aware of it at the time, I began almost subconsciously applying many of the
>
> intervention methods that we had discussed in class sessions.

*Evaluation*

In class, students are introduced to single-subject design and how it can be used as an evaluation tool in working with clients. Students can choose to conduct an evaluation with their clients on a formal or informal level. In their paper, they must provide their own evaluation of the triad sessions as well as reflect on how single-subject design may have been used (see Appendix G). **A student said,**

> In my triad, the student-client said that the triad was helpful. When asked how, she said, "Well, I don't know because I didn't try any of the ideas." So if she did not try anything, was it really helpful? I believe that evaluation is useful and important, but is not always honest and accurate. Therefore, the worker needs to not only do the client evaluation, but also needs to go back through the client's records and evaluate what is written there, how all the sessions progressed, and then decide if the intervention was effective.

*Closure and Follow-up*

Closure is the process of formally ending the worker-client relationship. Students are invited to work on the mutual resolution of feelings related to the closing of the case. They are encouraged to reflect on their own style of ending relationships and how this may affect their handling of this stage in a professional relationship. In the triad, students are instructed to work with their client in determining how they will maintain growth, and to give referrals if work remains to be done. Following this triad session, students are required to end their worker-client relationships (see Apendix G). While a follow-up stage is not allowed, the students are invited to think about this step and how they might implement it. **With relief, a student wrote,**

> By the time that I was ready to close out my working relationship with my client, I felt more confident. It was difficult for us to separate our relationships as worker and client,

and as friends outside of the classroom. I had developed an ongoing concern for this individual, but could relax a bit after the closure of the helping relationship since we no longer had to contend with the issue of a dual relationship. Thus, the termination of the relationship brought both a sense of accomplishment and of relief.

Teaching/Learning Values and Ethics

Teaching social work ethics is a critical ingredient in our social work curricula. Teaching ethics so that students can effectively apply them in real-life scenarios is a steep challenge for educators. The triad experience allows students to actively consider many of social work's values and ethics, especially diversity, dual relationships, and confidentiality.

*Diversity*

Students typically resist the implementation session dedicated to exploring issues of diversity. In the classroom, they are taught about many types of diversity, including race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, age, and religion, and ways to address these areas with clients. Student-workers are invited to explore any of these areas of diversity in their triad sessions. Exiting from the diversity triad sessions, students are typically in awe of the new opportunities presented through the discussions of diversity and realize that they can use their skills learned earlier to talk with student-clients about potentially sticky or difficult situations (see Appendix H). Experiential learning is noted repeatedly in the social work education literature on the teaching of cultural competence and broadening of students' experiences (Lu, Dane, & Gellman, 2005; Quinn, 1999; Sevig & Etzkorn, 2001). **A student reflected,**

Before meeting with my "client" in our triad session that was going to be geared towards addressing diversity, I struggled in thinking of ways that diversity was affecting her and affecting our working relationship. Once we began reviewing what was discussed in our

previous sessions together, a few diverse aspects arose that I thought may have been

insignificant, but I thought that I could try to address them in order to see what would

come about. To my surprise, these topics opened our discussion to new levels that we had

not previously reached. It ended up being an extremely rewarding and eye-opening

session for both client and worker.

*Dual Relationships*

   Students struggle with the social work ethic of dual relationships in the triad experience

as they are called on to be the "worker" for a fellow student. The NASW Code of Ethics asks

that practitioners "not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in

which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client" ( NASW, 1999). While total

abstinence from dual relationships is ideal, it is not always feasible, especially as they occur in

rural and other small community practice settings. Reamer (2006) states, "Dual or multiple

relationships can assume many forms, not all of which are ethically problematic" (p. 48).

   A study of NASW members found that over 20 percent of respondents "acknowledged

developing a friendship with a client," nearly 10 percent "reported seeing relatives or friends as

clients," nearly 25 percent "reported serving on community boards or committees with clients,"

and 25 percent reported "participating in recreational or social activities with clients" (Jayaratne,

Croxton, & Mattison, 1997, p. 191). Freud and Krug (2002) go a step further in noting that the

complete avoidance of dual relationships in rural communities is not only nearly impossible, but

may even by detrimental. They assert that a social worker who avoids community life may not

be accepted by the community and therefore services may also not be accepted.

   Reamer (2003) places boundary issues into categories around five themes: "(1) intimate

relationships, (2) pursuit of personal benefit, (3) emotional and dependency needs, (4) altruistic

gestures, and (5) responses to unanticipated circumstances" (p. 124). For many students, the triad exercise allows students to experience professional relationships for the first time. Under the supervision of their instructor, they learn first-hand about appropriate boundaries and can come to an understanding of what it means to empower your client rather than "do for" the client, and how it feels to allow a client self-determination rather than make decisions for them. Students also learn about the appropriate use of self-disclosure, using it only as it benefits their client and not for meeting their own needs.

Boland-Prom and Anderson (2005) urge a consideration of contextual issues when considering dual relationships. These issues include the type of social work practice; the level of community involvement of the social worker; the client's sense of independence; the legal standards in the state; the cultural framework of the client, the social worker, and the services provided; the social worker's personal needs and related countertransference issues; and consultant resources available to the social worker (p. 499).

The worker-client relationship is very time-limited, giving only 15 minutes on five occasions over a 6-week period. Students are strictly prohibited from expanding and/or continuing the client-worker relationship. Many students request longer than 15 minutes to meet with their client, but the instructor prohibits this activity by being physically present during triad sessions. Some students also wish to conduct a follow-up with their client, the last step of the Generalist Intervention Model, but the instructor also does not allow this as it would extend beyond the confines of the semester. Clients are able to contact the instructor if their worker attempts to expand or continue the worker-client relationship. The clients have multiple avenues of expressing their feelings of vulnerability, if present: in person to their worker, in writing on the feedback sheets, which go to worker and instructor, and directly to the instructor in writing,

over the phone, or face-to-face. Additionally, students are not graded on their "performance" as a client; they are only graded indirectly on their critical reflections of their experience as a client.

Since this class falls in the beginning of their social work education, students usually do not know each other well at the onset of the semester. In the triad experience, dual relationships are difficult as students continue to be in the same classrooms and potentially serve on groups or committees together. By the end of the semester, relationships are more established and students are relieved to end the dual relationships represented in the triad experience. Students come out of the triad experience with a clear understanding of the dangers and awkwardness of dual relationships. **One student spoke of her learning about dual relationship through the triad experience.**

> While we were doing the triads, it was hard for me to talk to my "client" when we were not in triad sessions. It is still hard to talk to my former client sometimes. I want to bring up the topics that we discussed in our triad experience and talk about them as a friend, but know that this is not appropriate. Even though it was difficult to avoid dual relationships during my triad experience, I feel that I am better equipped to handle them in the "real world." I know what a dual relationship is, and know strategies to prevent them.

*Confidentiality*

Confidentiality is paramount in social work practice, and is reflected in the NASW *Code of Ethics*. Client confidentiality is discussed in class in the context of social work ethics, and reinforced through the semester. In the triad experience, students learn firsthand that in order to engage and build trusting relationships with clients, they must offer confidentiality. Coupled with the challenge of dual relationships, students struggle with maintaining confidentiality when engaging in informal relationships with classmates. It is hoped that student-workers will refrain

from sharing the content of the triad sessions, knowing what it would feel like for their student-worker to do the same. Since the instructor is not able to monitor student interactions outside of the classroom, the instructor must rely on the student cohort to police itself. A signed confidentiality statement may be helpful, but still would not eliminate all breaches of confidentiality. A disciplinary policy for breaches of confidentiality could be put in place, but it would always need to be based on hearsay and enforcement would be very difficult.

The instructor, too, must grapple with confidentiality. Through supervision of the triads and the reading of student papers, the instructor typically gains information about students that he or she would normally not be privy to. The instructor is given the opportunity to model critical skills of being nonjudgmental and maintaining confidentiality, except when someone's safety is at risk. **A student reflected on learning about confidentiality.**

Maintaining confidentiality was a continuous struggle during the triad experience. I wanted to share what had happened during the triad with other classmates so that I could get their input, opinions, and advice on the situation. To prevent sharing confidential information with classmates, I shared the details of the triad with my professor through the paper I had to write following each triad. As the triad experience went on, I gained a greater understanding for the importance of confidentiality. I realized that the working relationship that I had with my client would have been ruined if I had shared confidential information with others.

Risks and Rewards for Instructors and Students

Similar to any significant experience, the teaching and learning of social work practice skills through the use of triads has both risks and rewards. These risks and rewards are presented here from both the perspective of the instructor and the perspective of the students.

*Risks*

One significant area of risk in using the triads as a learning experience is the calling of students to be authentic in their role as clients. The instructor must be particularly attentive to critical or serious issues that inevitably arise in student's triads. The instructor is professionally liable for clinical issues that arise and must remind student-workers that, just as in a practicum or place of employment, the client must come first, and we must follow the ethic of doing no harm.

The instructor has the opportunity to teach and model the importance of meeting client's needs first and starting where the client is, when grading assignments. Although students feel compelled to complete certain steps during certain triad sessions in order to meet assignment requirements, sometimes they must forego their agenda in order to attend to the client's needs. For example, what should a worker do when she or he finds during the Planning/Contracting triad that her or his client has just broken up with her boyfriend and needs to talk about her associated feelings? This simulates real life when the worker's agenda must sometimes be preempted by the client's immediate felt need. In the experiential learning model, this required level of flexibility sometimes frustrates some students as they are more accustomed to straightforward assignments that do not deviate from an expected course. The triad experience, therefore, provides students with the opportunity to problem-solve and think on their feet.

The instructor must not only be available to meet with students to give guidance, direction, and reassurance, but also must act proactively to identify and remedy difficult

situations. Typically, situations arise each semester that involve mental health issues (depression, anxiety, for example) or violence in dating or family relationships. When these situations arise, the instructor must intervene proactively, instructing both the student-worker and student-client that the situation is too difficult for beginning level of skills, redirecting them to more "safe" topics, and making appropriate referrals to the student-client. **One student reflected on the experience of working with a difficult client.**

> My student-client told me that she had been in treatment for [condition deleted] and there were many topics that she did not want to discuss. I really did not know what to say, so I told her if something came up she did not want to talk about to just tell me. After the session, I spoke with my teacher and she told me to stay on the surface—to talk about her daily schedule, her strengths, and her tasks and accomplishments. In the four remaining sessions, I felt that I had to be very careful and avoid many areas. I tried to come up with ideas and issues that would not interfere with or compound her condition, but this was very difficult. I feel that the help that I provided was superficial, but it was all that I could give in this situation. By working with this client, I learned that I can carry out a session even with an ambivalent client, that I can help someone even if it is in a small way.

*Rewards*

 Initially, students are reluctant, even resistant to the triad experience. Even in this structured and hopefully "safe" setting, students are fearful of trying new skills. Practice simulation often generates a strong emotional and cognitive response from students (Linsk & Tunney, 1997), which contributes to their confluent learning (Askeland, 2003). After meeting with their client for the first time, workers find, to their surprise, that they can combine their personal and professional selves to become an effective helper, and their confidence begins to

climb. By the middle of the triad experience, some students are gaining in confidence, while others are struggling with their identity and responsibilities as a worker. By the end of the semester, students emerge as workers with increased skills and confidence in their roles as social work practitioners. As stated by Linsk and Tunney (1997), "It should be remembered that the risks involved in simulations are minimal in comparison to those in actual practitioner-client interactions. The intent of the simulations is to offer a safe environment to hone practice skills and where neither the client (simulator) nor the student can actually be harmed—though it is easy to forget this during the emotions of a lively simulation" (p. 483). **A student recognized her growth and stated,**

> I went into the triad experience being very nervous and scared. I must admit the first session did not go well, but I learned and the second was easier and more productive. By the fifth session, I felt confident and sure of myself. I also feel that I am able to be more empathetic with the client after having sat in their shoes for a few sessions. I cannot imagine what it would be like practicing with clients without first doing triads at school.

The implementation and experience of triads to teach and learn social work practice skills is not for the fainthearted. For the instructor, it takes skill, flexibility, and large doses of time to structure the triads, give feedback, and grade papers. For students, it takes courage, the desire to learn, and the willingness to be vulnerable. The payoffs are apparent as students emerge with more confidence and with the skills needed to continue their journey toward becoming competent social work practitioners.

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Table 1 Overview of a Triad Meeting

| Session rotation #1 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Worker: | Student A | | Student A writes a 3-5 page paper, due in 1-2 weeks. |
| Client: | Student B | 15 minutes | Students B and C complete handwritten feedback sheets |
| Observer: | Student C | | immediately, give to Student A to assist in writing of triad paper. |
| | | 10 minutes | Verbal feedback, written feedback, regroup. |
| Session rotation #2 | | | |
| Worker: | Student B | | Student B writes a 3-5 page paper, due in 1-2 weeks. |
| Client: | Student C | 15 minutes | Students C and A complete handwritten feedback sheets |
| Observer: | Student A | | immediately, give to Student B to assist in writing of triad paper. |
| | | 10 minutes | Verbal feedback, written feedback, regroup. |
| Session rotation #3 | | | |
| Worker: | Student C | | Student C writes a 3-5 page paper, due in 1-2 weeks. |
| Client: | Student A | 15 minutes | Students A and B complete handwritten feedback sheets |
| Observer: | Student B | | immediately, give to Student C to assist in writing of triad paper. |
| | | 10 minutes | Verbal feedback, written feedback, regroup. |
| | Total | 75 minutes | |

Appendix A
**Triad #1: Engagement and Assessment**
<u>**ROLE: CLIENT**</u>

Client's name: _____

*Handwrite legibly, please. Be prepared to discuss a problem or issue that is <u>real</u> for you, yet not one of great depth or one that holds great emotion for you. Be genuine. During the session, seek to enter fully into your role of Client – try not to think about the skills the Worker is or is not demonstrating.*

Worker's Name: _____    Observer's Name: _____

1. What are a couple things the Worker did/said at the beginning of the session to make you feel comfortable? _____

   _____

2. Did you feel safe to share your problem/issue?  Why or why not? _____

   _____

3. Did you feel the Worker was a good listener?  Explain. _____

   _____

4. Did the Worker use self-disclosure?  Was it helpful, or not helpful? (<u>be truthful</u>)  Please explain. _____

   _____

5. a.  In what ways was the session helpful to you? _____

   _____

   b.  In what ways was the session <u>not</u> helpful to you? _____

6. How do you think it might feel to be a client? _____

   _____

   _____

Any other comments:

Appendix B
**Triad #1: Engagement and Assessment**
**ROLE: OBSERVER**

Observer's name: _____

*Handwrite legibly, please. Position yourself a few feet away from the Worker and Client – you need to be able to see and hear them, but not be involved. Do not participate in the session in any way - remain quiet, and refrain from any nonverbal forms of communication. You may take notes during the session. You're the timekeeper - make sure the session ends in about 15 minutes.*

Worker's Name: _____    Client's Name: _____

1. How did the Worker demonstrate the three "relationship-enhancing characteristics" during the session (warmth, empathy, and genuineness)?

   _____

2. What nonverbal forms of communication did you observe in the Worker?  Were they helpful? distracting?

   _____

   _____

3. Did the Worker use self-disclosure?  If so, was it effective (in your opinion)?  Please explain.

   _____

   _____

4. List and describe three things the Worker did well.

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

5. What constructive criticism might you offer to the Worker. _____

   _____

   _____

Any other comments:

Appendix C
## GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS ON SOCIAL WORKER PAPERS

The primary purpose of the triads is to further your professional growth.  The triad assignments seek to contribute to the your development in the following ways:

1. Focuses on the fact that social work is a consciously planned and purposeful process.
2. Heightens the student's awareness of content and affect in relation to self and client in conceptualizing the interaction.
3. Establishes skills of observation, critical thinking, and self-evaluation as a routine part of social work practice.
4. Provides practice in recognizing and communicating information significant to the helping process.
5. Offers a format for evaluation of the student.

Each triad paper is worth 25 points: 20 points for your paper, 5 points for turning in Observer and Client feedback sheets.  The triad paper must be typed, using correct spelling and grammar (but does not need to be in APA format).  The paper should be about 3-5 pages long (you do not need any references).  Answer all questions – use full sentences.  Please be truthful.  Your grade will be based on your paper and the submission of Observer and Client's notes – your grade will not be based on how well you did in the session, or on Observer or Client's comments.  Social work practice takes just that: practice.  Be patient with yourself… and practice a lot.

During the session, you are responsible to:
- Find a suitable place to conduct the session.
- Begin the session by setting the tone, asking questions, and seeking to form a good working relationship with your Client.
- Guide the session.
- Keep the session to about 15 minutes (not much longer, not much shorter).

Very important:  Everything that goes on in these sessions is confidential.  Your Client needs to know that s/he can trust you, and a big part of that is being assured that what s/he shares with you will be kept confidential.

Appendix D
**Triad #1: Engagement and Assessment**
<u>**ROLE: SOCIAL WORKER**</u>

*<u>Goals for the session:</u>*
- *Develop a good working relationship with your Client; and*
- *Conduct a mini-assessment.*

*You may take notes in with you, and you may take notes during the session (if you wish).*
*In this session, you are <u>not</u> responsible for bringing resolution to the Client's problem/issue.*

1. What are the first things you did/said to help the Client feel comfortable with you?
2. How did you seek to demonstrate the three "relationship-enhancing characteristics" during the session (warmth, empathy, and genuineness)?
3. Did you detect any ambivalence in your client?  How do you know?
4. Complete a mini-assessment on the client to include:
    a. Statement of client's presenting problem.
    b. What strengths and skills did you discover in the client's ability to solve the problem.
    c. What relevant systems are involved in the clients' problems.
    d. What resources are available or are needed to remedy or ameliorate problems.
    e. Discuss the clients' level of motivation to work on the problem.
5. How did the physical context of your session effect your time together?
6. a. What feelings did the process of the session evoke in you?
    b. What feelings did the content of the session evoke in you?
7. List at least three things you did well.
8. List some things you wish you had done differently.
9. When you meet with your Client next time and are moving into the "work" section of your session, what could your opening statements be?

Any other comments you wish to make.

Appendix E
**Triad #2: Planning and Contracting**
<u>**ROLE: SOCIAL WORKER**</u>

*Goals for the session:*
- *Continue building a good working relationship with your client;*
- *Work to define your client's problem; and*
- *Create a plan for work, including a contract.*

*You may take notes in with you, and you may take notes during the session (if you wish).*
*In this session, you are <u>not</u> responsible for bringing resolution to the Client's problem/issue.*

1. What was your opening statement(s) to your client as you moved into the "work" part of your time together?
2. Describe how you helped your client to define her/his problem. Include in your discussion how you demonstrated skills such as prioritizing, partializing, and/or translating problems into needs.
3. Did your client's presenting problem change from the first time you met? Discuss.
4. What specific goals and objectives did you set during your session together?
5. During this session, did you create a written, oral, or implied contract? Please describe, including a justification of your choice.
6. Did you detect any ambivalence in your client? How do you know? If yes, did you do/say anything to address this ambivalence? What did you do/say?
7. a. What feelings did the process of the session evoke in you?
   b. What feelings did the content of the session evoke in you?
8. List at least three things you did well.
9. List some things you wish you had done differently.
10. Next time you meet with this Client, what would you like to address?

Any other comments you wish to make.

Appendix F
**Triad #3: Implementation**
<u>**ROLE: SOCIAL WORKER**</u>

*<u>Goals for the session:</u>*
- *Continue building a good working relationship with your client (as needed);*
- *Continue working to define your client's problem (as needed);*
- *Continue to work on planning and contracting (as needed);*
- *Begin implementation.*

*You may take notes in with you, and you may take notes during the session (if you wish).*
*In this session, you may work <u>mutually</u> to bring resolution to the Client's problem.*

1. What "tuning in" skills did you demonstrate before/during this session?  Discuss.
2. Did your client's presenting problem change from the last time you were together?  What specific goals and objectives did you work on during your session together?
3. What elaborating and/or empathy skills were particularly helpful to you during your session together?
4. What obstacles to direct communication did you encounter?
5. Did you need to use any skills discussed under a) involuntary client; b) hard-to-reach client; or c) crisis intervention?  If so, please discuss.
6. a.  What feelings did the process of the session evoke in you?
   b.  What feelings did the content of the session evoke in you?
7. List at least three things you did well.
8. List some things you wish you had done differently.
9. From your perspective, what remains to be discussed in session with your client?

Any other comments you wish to make.

Appendix G
**Triad #5: Case Closure & Evaluation**
<u>**ROLE: SOCIAL WORKER**</u>

*Goals for the session:*
- *Bring Worker-Client relationship to an end.*
- *Evaluation of triad experience.*

*You may take notes in with you, and you may take notes during the session (if you wish).*

1. Even though you have a specific agenda for this triad, be sure to "tune in" to your client. Check progress since your last triad, and spend time (if needed) on discussing/processing your client's problem(s).
2. Through talking openly and honestly with your client, conduct an informal outcome and process evaluation of your triad experience together.
3. If this was a real-world experience, would this have been a good time to close the case with your client?  Why or why not?  If not, what remains to be done (in your professional opinion)?  (This does not need to be discussed with your client.)
4. How did you seek to "mutually resolve emotional reactions to ending?"  What feelings did your client express or display regarding ending?  What feelings do you have about ending?
5. What plans did you and your client make to "maintain gains achieved and to achieve continued growth?"
6. How might a single-subject design have been used in evaluating the work you did with your client?  Please describe.
7. List at least three things you did well in this session.
8. List some things you wish you had done differently in this session.

Any other comments you wish to make.

Appendix H
**Triad #4: Implementation – Diversity**
<u>**ROLE: SOCIAL WORKER**</u>

*Goals for the session:*
- *Continue building a good working relationship with your client (as needed);*
- *Continue working to define your client's problem (as needed);*
- *Continue to work on planning and contracting (as needed);*
- *Continue implementation, <u>especially exploring issues of diversity</u>*

*You may take notes in with you, and you may take notes during the session (if you wish).*
*In this session, you may work <u>mutually</u> to bring resolution to the Client's problem.*

1. Even though you have a specific agenda for this triad, be sure to "tune in" to your client. Check progress since your last triad, and spend time (if needed) on discussing/processing your client's presenting problem(s).
2. Did your client's presenting problem change from the last time you were together? What specific goals and objectives did you discuss during your session together?
3. In this triad, I want you to explore issues of diversity with your client. When preparing for, and during the session, be sure to consider the many types of diversity that may be present in the triad work with your client (race/ethnicity, class, disability, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, gender, age, body size, etc). (Obviously, you do not need to discuss all of these types of diversity – just the one (or more) that are pertinent.) For your paper, please answer the question: In what ways do you think/feel diversity plays a part in:
   - your Client's problem.
   - the resolution of your Client's problem.
   - your work with your Client.
   If you <u>truly</u> cannot think of how diversity impacts your client and/or his/her presenting problem (although I find that hard to believe), you may bring a story, issue, article, or something discussed in class to the triad – more of a psychoeducational approach – anything to spur on a constructive discussion of how your client is impacted by diversity. (This section will count for 10 of the 30 points total for this assignment.)
4. Be sure to remind your Client that your next time together will be your last. Begin preparing for the end of your Worker-Client relationship.
5. a. What feelings did the process of the session evoke in you?
   b. What feelings did the content of the session evoke in you?
6. List at least three things you did well.
7. List some things you wish you had done differently.

Any other comments you wish to make.