

Episode 111 - Marion Bogo: Innovations in Assessment of Students' Competence in Social Work

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're so sure. I'm your host Peter Sobota. Thanks for downloading more than 300000 of our podcasts. We'd love it if you took a minute to tell us what you like or don't like about them and what you'd like to see us do next. If you're an educator and you are using our podcasts and your courses please let us know how. I know some of you are as I've seen them on course syllabi out there. So let us know. We'd be thrilled to hear from you. Hello. This is Charles Syms your host for this podcast. Before introducing today's discussion I would like to bring to you two important updates. The first involves myself. It is my pleasure to be joining the podcast series team here at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. I am looking forward to working with the team and bringing to you the important and cutting edge topics and issues influencing and impacting social work practice and education. Second as the series other hosts Peter Sobota and I alluded to in December I am also introducing a new name for the podcast series in social work. We'll be replacing our previous title Living Proof. We hope our new name will speak more explicitly to the mission of the podcast series.

[00:02:01] Moreover we hope that you will continue to join us as we explore the important topics facing professional social work. Now let's turn to today's interview in the September 2012 NASW News. NASW president Dr Gene Enestus called for a boost in social work education in her comments. She says the rationale for this call is grounded in the realization that the challenges social workers face are increasing thus requiring a highly skilled professional Dr. Enestus ask all participants in the social work Educational Continuum including faculty field educators and students to quote the man the best of ourselves unquote. Professor Marion Bogo is a professor of social work at factor in WhentashFaculty of Social Work University of Toronto a scholar and researcher in field education and social work professor Bogo has been guest lecturer and consultant to schools of social work in Canada United States Asia Israel and the United Kingdom. Professor Bogo has published extensively including over 90 journal articles and book chapters on field education and social work practice and is a member of editorial boards of international journals in Social Work and Health Her research focuses on the development and testing of field education models and innovative approaches to assessment of student competence. Professor Bogo's current research focuses on educational outcomes assessment for competent social work practice and includes development of innovative evaluation methods. In an earlier podcast Professor Bogo examined the concept of field education as the signature pedagogy in professional social work education in this podcast. Professor Bogo extends that earlier discussion and talks about the research she and colleagues have conducted to understand and develop evaluation instruments for field education.

[00:04:17] She reviewed some of the challenges associated with the assessment of students in the field Filey. Professor Bogo also describes how this work has led to the development of two innovative methods for the evaluation of student performance in the field. Professor Bogo was interviewed by Marjoie Quartley field education coordinator with the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. I'm Marjoie Quartley field education coordinator here at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Here with me today to talk about innovations and assessment of students competence and social work is Professor Marion Bogo. Professor Bogo thank you so much for joining us today. My pleasure. What are some of the challenges in assessment of students learning and social work programs. Well generally when we look at the literature there is concerns in both

academic courses and field education regarding grade inflation in this field. The problem is even more marked in that studies tend to show that the great majority of our students appear to do extremely well in their field evaluations even though anecdotally we know that there are many students who struggle and field instructors. Really we have to give these students a much more modest grade. The problem regarding evaluating student competence in the field has been addressed in a number of studies and some of the issues that have come out is a question as to whether field instructors when they think about students practice whether they're conceptualisation maps well onto the rating scale that we use for example field instructors work with students in a wide range of situations. Team meetings in individual or group supervision. And of course reviewing their practice.

[00:06:32] And they tend to form an overall impression of the students that very often we're asking field instructors to evaluate our students using scales and scales to acquire them to deconstruct a general impression to deconstruct the students practice and then find the numbers to represent how the students is doing on a particular dimension and often the scales consist of endless lists of discrete skills and so what may in fact happen is that the field instructors evaluation of the student performance becomes more and more distant from a real authentic representation of this view. The other point that comes out in a number of studies is that evaluations in keeping with ideas about adults learning and collaboration with students that the evaluation often becomes a negotiation. Regarding the rankings the ratings on the scale and negotiating with students in the context of the intense relationship that the student and feel of instructor has developed appears to leave field instructors to do what they call quote give in and enhance through rates students higher and higher. You've really raised an important issue and some challenges of that way of course here at our school. While where the challenge again depending on the nature of the relationship what the field educator and students. Marion how have the 2008 educational policy and accreditation standards the IPASS contributed to devising better approaches to assessing student educational outcomes. I think the IPASS has taken those who work education far ahead. Now we have to remember that social work educators were new to the competency based education model. If we look at her colleagues in medicine nursing and psychology they've been trying to figure out competency based education and assessments using that framework for many many decades. So I think we have to be patient with our own learning curve.

[00:09:06] And while we can learn a lot from other professions who struggled with us we do need to develop our own body of knowledge about confidence and I really want to underscore that we're in the early years of doing this. I've been working with colleagues from my research team here at the factory and one has Faculty of Social Work in Toronto for almost 10 years now trying to conceptualize confidence and then to develop innovative ways of assessing competence and where we think iPass has provided such useful framework is that their emphasis is on doing that the outcome of our educational programs is really are we preparing effective competence ethical social workers to do practice. Furthermore that emphasis on doing incompetence is not as simplistic with that of endless endless skills but rather a recognition that social work practice consists of very complex practice behaviors and that those practice behaviors should demonstrate or give evidence of students ability to integrate a number of dimensions. So one dimension is the value base of the profession. Another dimension is the organizational content of the programs the policies the models the mandates of the setting. Another dimension is the way in which students use generic and specialized knowledge to inform their thinking their judgment their planning and the actions that they take in their practice. And we know that the way in which we think about practice is very much impacted by our own self.

[00:11:14] The assumptions we make the degree to which to practice situations or emotionally we lead to discomfort on our own part will lead to what we call emotional dysregulation and that that emotional state of the social worker will in turn affect the decisions they make and the actions they

take. And all of this was enacted through the basic interpersonal interviewing interaction skills so the competence model that iPass 2008 presents us with really integrates these very complex dimensions of social work practice but integrates them in a way that should always relate to how the social work student or social work practitioners actually performs. So it's not enough to look at whether students know the body of knowledge whether they know the value statements whether they can analyze ethical situations. That's important but not enough. What a consonance model leads us to studying how that's actually put into practice with clients groups and communities. You've talked about this before I know when you are here in Buffalo in the spring and I believe in an earlier podcast and I think that you're right the emphasis on students performance and actually putting their knowledge and skills from the classroom into practice and field is so critical in order to be able to develop themselves as professional competent social workers. Yes and that's where iPass with the competency framework and the elevation of Field education as the signature Pedagogy of the profession really emphasizes our responsibility to prepare students for practice. Absolutely. So given some of the challenges that you've identified what are some of the innovations that have developed and tested for educational outcomes assessment. We been working as I said over about the last 10 years and we've come up with two major approaches. One is what we call the online field evaluation tool and the second is the object of structured clinical examination adapted for social work. So let me first talk a bit about the online tool.

[00:14:03] When we start doing our research. We asked field instructors to describe these were very experienced field instructors who were seen by our field office and colleagues as Masters field educators. So we asked them to describe their best students and exemplary students. Their most difficult students were student who presented with many problematic behaviors and then what we called an average or middle of the road students. And from these many descriptions we were able to develop composite vignettes of about 20 students along a continuum from exemplary to presenting problematic behaviors. We then called in another group of field instructors and asked them to independently rank these student yes from the top to the bottom and what we were amazed by was an enormously high correlation in field instructors agreeing on what constituted the best the middle and the problematic students. So we had about 20 vignettes with rich descriptors infield instructors language along a number of dimensions. And so we took these descriptors and put them into these six dimensions and you can find more description about all of us on our competency based Web site. What we were so pleased about was that we had six major domains. The first one was learning and development and it really spoke to the students whole approach to learning a second one that was very important for behavior in the organization. And that review reflected how key social work practice is in relation to teens to colleagues to being situated in the organization. The next one was relationships and the student's ability to form relationships both within the organization and with clients. The next one a key dimension was conceptualizations practice.

[00:16:54] In other words to what extent has the student really understands the theoretical and value underpinnings of practice and can demonstrate that in their work the next dimension was assessment and intervention and the final one was presentation because we present orally and in written materials so we have these six dimensions and underneath each dimension as I say we had these rich behavioral descriptors in field instructors words and they were ranked from the top to problematic. So we first experimented and put them into a scale and did some research on that and found that even though we didn't have numbers we had descriptors as long as they were placed in a linear way in front of the field instructors. We were getting grade inflation so we kind of thought oh my god we failed to spend tons of money and tons of time trying to develop a better evaluation method. And then we got the idea of taking these descriptors and taking away any numerical rankings but rather listing them alphabetically. So you would have a descriptor that would be ranked perhaps 5 next to a descriptor that was ranked 1 because although the numbers the numerical grounding with Hanssens and we put this into an online tool so field instructors at midterm and at the final evaluation would go online and see the large dimensions for example the dimension of

behavior in the organization and then they would see about 30 descriptors. But scripters as I said were all alphabetical and field instructors were asked to select a minimum of five descriptors for their students and when they had completed the entire tool the computer generated the score. We then did research on that and found that we were not getting grade inflation.

[00:19:20] We actually were beginning to get a differentiation in field instructors evaluation of student performance. Now it's also very important to say that we took the negotiating between student and field instructor out of this equation. So the field instructor went online. That was all password completed the evaluation once it was completed. That can change. It was submitted then the student did the same thing and then after both of them had submitted their evaluations to the school. They could then meet discuss and see the respective evaluations that they had completed and if there was great discrepancy then the field liaison would be called in and there would be a different process. What we were really trying to do here was take help as much as possible. The interpersonal dimensions but also space. The scaling the 1 to 5 because it seems to give field instructors a 1 to 5 scale everybody slides 2 4 and 5 rankings. So we're very pleased with this too. We had developed it only for our micro students. Direct practice students and more recently we've worked on a macro tool which we have just completed and we've been using it. We have not yet been able to test that to see whether we're getting better variation in students scores than when we use our previous approaches. So while these research studies have been published in the Journal of Social Work Education and in the journal research and social work practice and people who are interested in reading more about this can see the actual process that we went through to develop these tools.

[00:21:32] It's so exciting to hear about your research in that area because as you say what you are finding and feel that occasion in your area really across the board. I would imagine as we see here at our university and saw the way that you came up with the domains those are significant competency areas that students really need to demonstrate that they are on the higher end. Like I said in terms of we want our students to be the best for field educators to have a better way of assessing and evaluating students as critical because I think we also saw the scaling as challenging the one to five and have gone to a ratings system of levels of competence and we have definitely found that that is an improved way of assessing. But the way that you have identify things descriptors I think again the concern of grade inflation. I think you have made tremendous impact. The other thing that came out of our study center and we probably had over 100 field instructors involved in all of our various studies. Every time they came in to participate in helping us with whatever tool we were testing at the moment we would ask them about their experience in evaluating and a very strong message that we kept getting was that the burdens of evaluation of student confidence and of gatekeeping should be shared with the university. And by that they meant and why should the field instructor be the only person evaluating practice confidence that the schools the programs of Social Work really needed to begin to take seriously not only evaluating students knowledge which of course we do through all our courses but also evaluating student confidence.

[00:23:39] And we took that message very seriously and again started to look at what colleagues are doing in related health professions and that's how we came to start working. Oh when about the last five six years on what's called an Osprey. The objective structured clinical evaluations and that's been a very very interesting new approach for us. It's been very time consuming but we feel we've developed a set of measures a set of cases that others can use and we're currently working on a manual so that we're hoping to spread the technology to other cells to work educators. That's exciting. Can you describe us and adapted our social work. So our ski stands for objects structured clinical exam and what it involves is that a set scenario or a social work situation is developed and an actor is trained to portray that particular scenario. Students are then given a very brief paragraph describing the agency context and the preventing problem much as you would receive in an intake. The students then directly interact with the client for about 12 to 15 minutes and the performance is

observed by a raider who is unknown to the students. So the relationship dimensions between the narrator and the students is taken out of this examination and the Raiders uses a scale again scale that we have worked on developing and testing for its reliability and validity. And because these are trained actors every student gets the same scenario and the actors are trained to respond based on the degree to which the students are using the competencies and skills that we're expecting of them in the particular course or if used isn't the end of a one year program to assess readiness to go into the second year of the field.

[00:26:27] It's again you're working with a particular set of competencies. So in related health professions may be exposed to as many as 10 different scenarios. Obviously this would be very very expensive. So when we first began to experiment with this we were fortunate in getting a fairly substantial research grants and we didn't sell up Dynarski that consisted of five scenarios. We were able to get a good number of volunteers and we ran about quinsy for social work students and social work practitioners through five Osteen's scenarios. So these scenarios for example was an immigrant mother who had been called in to see the school social worker because her oldest child that 13 year old boy was beginning to demonstrate some acting out in the classroom and the school teacher knew that the father had recently died. So here we have this 15 minute interaction with an actor trained to portray distraught mother who's dealing with the recent loss of her husband in an occupational accident trying to manage finances trying to manage the family her three children the oldest of which is this 13 year old boy and being in a new country with very few family support or community support. So we have five scenarios that are quite typical of what a social worker would encounter and all these scenarios were developed with social workers practicing in that particular area. So the aim is to make them feel really authentic. The student then goes and performs this 15 minute interview and then engages in what we have called a structured reflection. The reflection was built in the concept for our view of confidence and I spoke earlier in our discussion today.

[00:28:50] That confidence is not only the use of particular skills that you see in performance but rather is the demonstration of these underlying ideas about how we use the knowledge base how we use our self how we manage our emotional reactions in our interactions how we use the value base of social work and so on. So we developed a structured reflection that would require US students regarding these various dimensions of confidence and we also look at rating scales. The reader would use to capture the student's reflections and in our rating scale. We're trying to capture how rare how conceptual the student is in thinking about the encounters that they've just had with that particular scenario. So our volunteers who are quite marvelous because they spent about three hours doing a 15 minute interview followed by a 15 minute reflection and then going into the next station where they did a 15 minute interview and a 15 minute reflection and so on through five scenarios the study itself was very very interesting and it yielded very good results. We were able to demonstrate that our scales had high internal consistency and moderate reliability across the five stations. So we feel very confident that these are for social science research fairly good scales and they're up on our Web site. So anybody who wants to use them is welcome to take a look at them. We also found that we are skill set constructs validity because we were able to differentiate between experienced workers and students in masters programs so that the workers uniformly received higher rankings than the students. And again the Raiders didn't know if the people who were doing the interviewing the people they were rating were students or were experienced social workers.

[00:31:32] So we were very enthused that we had developed a method this Oskin method with a reflective dialogue and we had developed scales that works and what was especially interesting was that we did not in this research project give the students any feedback during the day but the students we had a questionnaire on satisfaction. The students rated the experience one of the best they had ever had. They felt they had learnt tremendously just from going through these five scenarios and they felt that they were very energized by the whole experience. We also as part of the research offered to meet with them to review their performance. Interestingly very few people

took us up on it. They really felt the Syrians that interviewing and reflecting had added to their learning. So we were very enthused as I said that we'd come up with a very good method. The only problem was as you can imagine this is a very very expensive undertaking because you're using trained actors and we have a very large master's program of about 250 students. Well that is very interesting research and when you talked about the way that the students experienced tests we often find students get anxious and I would imagine that some of their students prior to May have had some apprehension. Well these four volunteers though even though they did say they were a bit anxious. These were very keen people. But then we decided to roll the program out and do a modification that was affordable. And so we have a delayed entry field practicum model in the first semester of the first year of the master's program. Students are enrolled in two companioned courses.

[00:33:38] One is the methods or practice course different names in different schools but essentially it's introducing students for social work practice theory. And the other is what I would call a skills lab plus. And these two courses are offered together in an integrated way by the same instructor with a group of about 18 students. So students get a pretty in-depth immersion in basic generic social work practice concepts and skills. And we've been refining this course over decades and have integrated the ideas I spoke about with respect to competence in teaching the course. So we're looking at teaching knowledge skills reflection emotional regulation and critical thinking. We decided that a very good outcome assessment would be a modified Toschi. And so with the support of our Dean we were able to get the funding to have a one station asking for 125 students as one of the final assignments in this course in order to handle the kind of anxiety you're talking about. We made a pass or fail and the honesty itself was only one part of the assignments for this course. In other words because we were just introducing this and just starting to do the research on it we conveyed to the students that this was low risk high performance was expected. And so every student at the end of the semester participated in this one stationer scheme which consisted of interviewing for 15 minutes a standardized client a trained actor while a rater was in the room and the rater was one of the course instructors but not their own course instructor.

[00:35:56] So to someone unknown to them and following the interviews the students did the structured reflection which was then given back to that rater and that rater rated the reflections on rating scales and number of very very interesting findings came out of a study and the study was recently published in research on social work practice. The first thing was enormously high enthusiasm on the part as to what was so interesting was that they knew that they were going to be rated on their interviewing skills and we've taught this course for years and we're always saying to the students if you really want to be ready for the practicums you've got to practice practice role playing but practice the skills and students would say yes yes I know but I'm too busy. I have to write this paper I have to write that paper because the last day was an exam. Their preparation changed and they did practice that they told us that they spent tons of time practicing the interviewing skills. So we really achieve the goal of enhancing learning. The other things that students told us was that by being able to interview a trained actor as they had it gave them tremendous confidence that they had the skills to engage with real clients in the practicum and they were going into the practicum in about three or four weeks. There was a very small group of students maybe five out of 125 who were very very anxious and hated the experience and we try to identify those students and provide them with more support. Very interesting finding was that we were really able to see variation in student ratings in our ratings of student performance. So we did not have grade inflation.

[00:38:13] There was a range as you would expect on the rating scale of students who performed moderately well more to replace moderately poorly and a few students who performed quite poorly both in the interview and in the reflection. So then we took a look at the correlation between the student's performance on this one station Osteen's and students evaluations in the field. At the end

of the practicum and we found an interesting correlation that there is an association between the way students performed in this one day in our schools and their final evaluations. The one caveat is that all the students who performed poorly in the field had also performed poorly on the Aussies. So that was very interesting findings. Not all of the students who performed poorly on the Austine performed poorly in the practicums. So we spent a lot of time trying to understand why this was so. And we have many potential explanations. But when I presented this to a group of field instructors in Toronto they thought that it could be because we were actually observing students behaviour in an interview and they questioned whether field instructors routinely observe students in their practice in the fields. The concern was that often the field instructors are hearing or reading students accounts of their practiced behaviour of their interviews. But Field instructors are not actually watching the interviews. And one of the things that we found that was very interesting was we observed that students in the aski actually conducting the interview. And then we read their reflections and in some students reflections they wrote that they had performed behaviors which the observer regular No. And in fact they had not performed. So it was not that the students were making up a story.

[00:41:01] It's rather we know that we have a tendency to distort when I say we I think it's part of the human condition and there's enough research in cognitive psychology to support that. So the Toschi I think is very promising not only for evaluating student confidence but also for helping us prepare students and field instructors for the field. So in the past year what we did was the instructor in these courses took the Oskin results and their own observations and Rodong evaluation that detailed students strengths and students areas for further development and students must take that evaluation to the field instructor and together use it to begin to construct the living and contract and learning plans and the faculty field liaison views the contract and plan to ensure that the information in the evaluation from the first term is incorporated in learning plans and our next study is going to interview students field instructors and liaisons to find out whether they use this whether it's helpful whether it makes a difference. While what you describe Marian as such important information and practice for students to have that great opportunity prior to going into the failed to increase their confidence and decrease than normal anxiety that they often fail before going to fail and bridging the gap between classroom. What's learned the knowledge the skill base and having that available to bring with it to fail is really a game. I think that you're giving to students so that their chances of success when they're practicing sales are much greater. Yes yes we really are hoping that it will create a much stronger bridge between what we're doing in the school and what we're doing in the field.

[00:43:20] Marian What have you found in your research on the map. Well pretty well the kind of information that I've just been sharing with you that we get a much greater distribution of student confidence. We see people at different levels of confidence so senseless grade inflation and some predictive ability to say here are students who are performing at the low end in the scheme. And this may signal that they will have more difficulty in the field and hence we should be putting in additional resources to help these students succeed. One of the things we would we've been thinking about doing is using these on skis. At the end of the first year. And similarly providing information to the second year field instructor based on the off the. So the information that sometimes goes from year to year to via the field evaluation would be supplemented with this USPI. At this stage we haven't done enough research to say these are Skees are highly predictive but we have growing confidence both them and my colleague Mary Rawlings in an undergraduate social work program at Azusa Pacific University in California has also been experimenting with similar. She's adapted our scales and we try to use similar scenarios. And she's finding that this Aussie approach is acceptable for undergrads BFW students who also have not even entered fields. So I think it's a very promising methodology and that leads us then to teach for more using simulations. People often say that it's expensive and resources aren't an issue but I think yes our commitment is education for practice. Then the question becomes what is the most effective way of using our resources.

[00:45:50] And since all of our health professional colleagues are teaching and assessing student confidence using simulation I think it's time for social work educators to seriously consider this. I think absolutely right. Marion and I highly encourage nowheres to take a look at our website described resources that are available that I think would be invaluable to field educators practitioners faculty staff anyone in social work then if we barely appreciate air time Marion to discuss really critical issues and feel that occasion and incompetency and social work thank you very much. It's been a pleasure sharing VSL long program or research and I encourage others to get involved with that. It's very interesting and it really appears to have high acceptability on the part of students and faculty members. You have been listening to Professor Marion Bogo discuss her work on research and innovations in social work field education. For more on Professor Bogo's work please go to social work podcast number 65. This is Charles Syms your host inviting you to join us in the future for in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.