

Teaching Mediation Skills to Social Work Research Students:
An Experimental for Engaging Students in Inquiry and Evaluation
Submitted by Dr. Ronnie Mahler

Many undergraduate Social Work students are resistant to learning research and statistical methods, which are fundamental to evaluating the impact of Social Work interventions with client systems. Yet this is a primary objective of the Social Work Department and the Council on Social Work Education. The following comment expressed by a more outspoken student clearly describes many students' attitudes about research methods: 'I took Social Work because I wanted to help people. I don't want to be a researcher and I'm not good at math. I don't see why we have to do research. '

Epstein's (1987) observation that "no other part of the social work curriculum has been so consistently received by students with as much groaning, moaning, eye-rolling, hyperventilation, and waiver strategizing as the research course" (p. 71) has been cited repeatedly to describe student attitudes about research (Dunlap, 1993; Green et al., 2001; Montcalm, 1999; Royse & Rompf, 1992; Royse, 1995). Furthermore, studies and social work research texts (Royse, 1995; Rubin & Babbie, 1997) have documented students' initial apprehension and negative views about taking research courses (Bogal & Singer, 1981; Lawson & Berleman, 1982; Poulin, 1989). Therefore, social work research educators continually search for teaching strategies to counteract negative attitudes and to motivate interest in the subject (Epstein, 1987; Ramachandran & De Sousa, 1985; Royse & Rompf, 1992; Wainstock, 1994).

In the summers of 2004 and 2005 it was the intention of this 'scholar of teaching and learning' (SOTL) educator to motivate resistant learners by engaging my three-week summer school class in a real life "experiment". In 2004, 10 social work research students were invited to participate in a 4-hour educational intervention on conflict mediation. These potential participants were told that their knowledge of conflict and ways to resolve it, as well as their own approaches to conflict would be studied in a pre-post group design. In 2005, 12 students enrolled in Research Methods in Social Work participated in a somewhat abbreviated, 3-hour workshop using the same content and format that had been given in the previous year.

In both the 2004 and 2005 summer Research classes, we determine whether participating in a 2 day in-class workshop on conflict and mediation had increased their knowledge of the subject and their awareness of the particular approaches to conflict which each seemed to favor. My rationale for selecting *mediation* as the content of intervention is considerable agreement among undergraduate Social Work educators that mediation is a core social work function of which entry level social workers should have basic understanding. Being able to hear, tolerate, and help clients or co-workers who are experiencing conflict with institutional agents, such as the social worker at Child Protection or Child Welfare, involves a set of knowledge and skills to which our students currently are minimally exposed.

Method

Procedure

The second day of class this educator explained the ethical standards and procedures which apply to research with human subjects, underscoring three principles: 1) Do no harm. (2) Respect privacy by employing confidentiality or collecting information anonymously. (3) Promote self-determination by ensuring that research subjects are informed sufficiently about the research to decide whether they want to participate. The class was provided with a consent form on which appeared the general purpose of the study, procedures and duration, benefits, risks, an explanation of how their confidentiality would be respected, the payments/incentives being offered, and their right to withdraw. The consent form in its entirety is attached as Appendix A, however, the procedures regarding confidentiality and the use of incentives merit further explanation. With regard to confidentiality, information that participants provided was associated with an identification number (their birth date, e.g. 062075 for the participant who was born on June 20, 1975). This procedure respected participants' privacy, at the same time permitting pre-post data comparisons within subjects. As per incentives, students were advised that participants who completed the pre-intervention survey and day 1 workshop would receive 5 extra credit points added to their first test grade. Similarly, participants who completed the post-intervention survey and day 2-workshop would receive 5 extra credit points added to their second test grade.

After the intervention and post-tests, and some course materials on preliminary descriptive and inferential statistics, students worked together in-class to evaluate the effect of the educational workshop in which they had participated. They used Excel to formulate means, standard deviations, correlations and t-tests. The latter was used to determine whether the research hypothesis, below, was supported:

Subjects participating in a pre-post pre-experimental design, attending a 2-day workshop on conflict and conflict resolution, will demonstrate a significant increase in knowledge and a greater awareness of their own personal conflict style post intervention.

Subjects

All ten students in the summer 2004 class agreed to participate in this pre-experimental group design. Nine of the ten students completed both the pre-post intervention measures. One student was sick for two days, which meant she was unable to complete the pre-intervention measures and unable to participate in the first day of the educational workshop. Her post-test score was omitted from the analysis. Thus, data from nine students were gathered and later analyzed by the students. What follows is a paraphrased description of the sample provided by one of student-participants.

A total of 9 (1 male and 8 females) subjects was involved in the original study. Their mean age was 28.56. The ages ranged from 21- 45 (The standard deviation of 8.2 was large). Amongst this group were 5 African Americans (55.56%) and 4 Caucasians (44.44%). Eight of the subjects were single (88.89%) and one subject was divorced (11.11 %). Three subjects

were Catholic (33.33%), 4 were Protestant/Christian (44.44%), and 2 had no affiliation with a religion (22.22%).

In the 2005 replication, which also occurred during 3-week module of the third summer session, 12 students completed both the pre-post intervention measures. The 2005 sample, as in 2004, was predominantly comprised of females: there were 2 males and 10 females. Their mean age was 26.17, slightly younger than the students in the class of 2004. The ages ranged from 20- 47; the standard deviation of 8.2 was again large. The 2005 sample was comprised of 2 African Americans (17%) and 10 Caucasians (83%), whereas in 2004 the class was nearly evenly divided between African-Americans and Caucasian-students. Nine subjects were single (67%) and 3 subjects were married (33%); none of the students in the 2004 sample were married at that time. In 2005, 4 subjects were Catholic (33%), 4 were Protestant/Christian (33%), and 4 had no affiliation with a religion (33%). The 2004 sample was more likely to report being affiliated with a religious group.

The Educational Intervention

Charlene Brumley has a masters in conflict mediation and years of experience serving as a mediator in divorce mediation. She was also instrumental in formulating on-campus mediation services. Brumley provided the informational seminar to the subject over a two-day period. The student-participants sat around a conference table which permitted eye contact, and lent a relaxed yet structured atmosphere to the learning experience.

The first day students were informed that *conflict* involves an interaction between or among people who perceive that their goals or interests are incompatible. Conflict is a normal occurrence in relationships in which people are interdependent. While there are many ways to deal with conflict, five common approaches are--A voiding, Competing, Accommodating, Collaboration and Problem-solving. There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these approaches. Ms. Brumley also described conflict activities which are characteristic of avoidant families, collaborative families, and aggressive families to clarify these stances. Participants were introduced to the LENS model which emphasizes that conflicts are in large part a function of preconceived thoughts or attributions about the other party's motives and actions. These perceptions can be grounded in the present but more often are influenced by the interpreter's previous experiences, with others and/or with the party(ies) in question. A conflict mediator needs to view interpersonal conflict as a process whereby constructive actions are taught and modeled. To resolve conflict, the parties need to-- understand each other's needs, be flexible, and focus on what each person really needs to achieve to feel s/he has reached a positive resolution. The goal is to change positions, which are fixed and rigid statements, into an expression of what is most important for the parties involved. This ultimately requires attention to basic needs, e.g., safety, belonging, self-esteem and self-efficacy. This constructive process for resolving conflict is captured in the acronym, PIN (position, interest, need). The first day seminar lasted for approximately 2.5 hours in 2004, and 1.5 hours in 2005.

The second day began with a summary of the Position, Interest, and Need (PIN) Model which reframes conflict positions into less charged, rational terms. The LENS model was reviewed, that is, individuals bring their own view of other parties' intentions, along with their own family history and personal approaches to conflict situations. Student/participants also summarized the steps in conflict mediation: Set guidelines for active listening, and constructive, focused sharing of the problem. Help the parties express and hear each other. Identify the needs of each party. Generate suggestions, emphasizing the importance of finding solutions that all parties agree with. Discuss the potential solutions and choose options acceptable to the parties. Most of the second day presentation consisted of a role-play in which participants played the husband, wife and mediator roles. The scenario involved a family in conflict regarding the parents' different expectations for their grade school-aged children. The role-play was interrupted several times for participants to provide feedback and suggestions about the steps to follow in the mediation session. For example, the worker was advised to pull back and try another tack when she appeared to be taking sides. In both summer classes, the second seminar day lasted for approximately 1.5 hours.

Regarding treatment fidelity in 2004, one participant was absent for day one of the presentation; another participant was absent for day 2 of the intervention. Fortunately, in 2005 no one missed either day of the workshop presentations.

Data Collection Procedure and Instruments

In-class distribution and completion of measurement instruments occurred pre and post intervention during the second week of class. Student-participants completed 3 documents.

The first, the Conflict Knowledge Test [(C-Know) appears in Appendix B] was comprised of 20 questions designed to measure participants' knowledge of conflict. Students were queried about: the steps in managing a conflict, actions associated with constructive outcomes, actions associated with non-constructive outcomes, common styles or approaches to conflict, the difference between a conflict style and a conflict tactic, and social work strategies and roles which might be used to help clients in conflict situations. Eighteen questions required fill-in answers; two questions were of the multiple choice format. The same C-Know Test was completed by the participants immediately after the 2 day-intervention.

The second measurement instrument, the Survey for Understanding Preferred Response to Conflict (C-Style Survey), consisted of 20 items arranged in a response matrix with Likert-style choices ranging from 1= I never react this way to conflict; to 5= I almost always react this way to conflict. The origin of this index at the time of this write-up is unknown, except that the instrument was obtained from a field educator at Every Person Influences Children (EPIC). They use the tool with parents to increase awareness about different and favored ways of responding to conflict. Each of five styles (avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, problem solving) is illustrated by four indicators in the survey. The avoidant style is characterized by ignoring, withdrawing, or postponing actions in response to conflict. For example, statement one of C-Style Survey reads: *It is easier to walk away from the*

conflict than to involve myself. Items 1, 6, 11, and 16 appear to be illustrate the avoidant style.

In contrast, the competing style is marked by a win-lose approach in which threats and aggression are evident. Items 2, 7, 12, and 17 were intended to measure the extent to which participants employ competition as their primary approach to conflict. For example, statement two reads: *I would rather make persons do what I want than assist them in changing their way of thinking.*

The accommodating approach uses smoothing, yielding, and obeying when responding to conflict situations. The accommodating style is reflected in items 3, 8, 13, and 18. Item 3 seems illustrative: *I think kind words will "smooth over" the problem.*

A compromising style shows signs of exchange, sharing, and efforts to find a middle ground. The compromising approach to conflict is measured by items 4, 9, 14, and 19. Item 4 seems to typify this style: *What I give up for people I expect in return.*

And lastly, the problem-solving approach to conflict, as measured by items 5, 10, 15, 20, seeks a win-win objective through the exploration of options and mutual respect. Item 5 is intended to reflect this approach: *I am the first to suggest alternatives to conflict.*

This researcher decided to use the C-Style Survey to explore whether it was a reliable and valid tool to decipher conflict style, and to attempt to heighten participants' awareness of their own approaches to conflict situations. The C-Style Survey was completed prior to the intervention. At the same time, participants were asked to estimate the percent of time they used each of the conflict styles by jotting down numbers which added up **to 100%** (document 3). Later these two measures of conflict style would be correlated to determine their relative validity. The C-Style Survey was also completed post-intervention. The pre-post sub-scores from the C-Style Survey were correlated to determine whether participants' response at time one would be consistent with their responses at time two. This is a form of test-retest reliability. To feel confident that the C-Style Survey was a reliable instrument, the correlation between pre and post sub-scores should yield coefficients of $+ .75$ or higher.

In document 3, participants were also asked to estimate how much they knew about conflict by indicating one of the following: (1) very little; (2) a moderate amount; (3) a great deal.

The exact same instruments were completed post-intervention.

Results

By employing Excel, a user friendly software, the students were able to determine that as a group their post-intervention knowledge of conflict and mediation was statistically significantly greater than their knowledge scores prior to the intervention, ($p < .005$, $N_{2004}=9$; $N_{2005}=12$). In 2004, there was no

significant increase in students' estimate of their knowledge regarding conflict post-intervention when compared to their pre-intervention knowledge estimates. However in 2005, the students' post-intervention estimate of their knowledge about conflict had increased; this was statistically significant, $p < .05$, $N_{2005} = 12$).

Correlations between the participants' perception of the degree to which they employed the 5 conflict styles and their scores on the sub-scales of the C-Style Survey were completed pre- and post-intervention. In the 2004 findings, only two of the sub-scales appeared to attain validity at post-test: the correlation between avoidance sub-scales and participants' estimate of their use of this approach to conflict obtained a $+ .85$; the correlation for the competition sub-scales and their own estimate of their use of that approach obtained a correlation of $+ .71$. Both of these correlations exceeded the $+ .5$ level which is needed to trust that the measure is a valid one. These same correlations were much smaller when performed pre-intervention. This suggests that the students became more knowledgeable about approaches to conflict and their own personal approaches. These 2004 data give support to the second prediction made in the research hypothesis.

Students were able to perform pre-post correlations to determine whether the Avoidance, Competition, Accommodation, Compromise, and Problem-Solving sub-scales attained $+ .75$ or higher correlations, which would show test-retest reliability of the sub-scales. Derived from the 2004 findings, the Competition and Accommodation sub-scales did, in fact, yield pre-post correlations of $+ .81$ and $+ .83$, respectively.

In the 2005 data analyses, six correlations between **survey sub-scale scores and participants' self estimates** reached empirical validity ($+ .5$ or greater) as illustrated in the following table:

<u>Pre-intervention correlations</u>	<u>Post-intervention correlations</u>
$+ .89$ * <u>Avoidance</u> scale & participants' estimate of their use of this approach	$+ .82$ *
$+ .54$ * <u>Compete</u> scale & participants' estimate of their use of this approach	$+ .39$
$+ .55$ * <u>Accommodation</u> scale & participants' estimate of using this approach	$+ .67$ *
$+ .05$ <u>Competition</u> scale & their self-estimate of using this approach	$- .16$
$+ .57$ * <u>Problem-solving</u> scale & their self-estimate of using this approach	$+ .47$

* Correlations exceeded $+ .5$ level needed to affirm the validity of the measure.

The indicators intended to measure the *competitive style of dealing with conflict* need reframing. In 2005, students were asked whether their interest in the data analysis assignment was affected by the fact that the data they were analyzing had originated with them. Ten respondents (83%) replied that they were more interested in the statistics part of the class because of this. Their comments about the 2-day workshop on Conflict/Mediation were very positive: Content was good-excellent (3 students) and interesting (2 students); Loved the workshop; Enjoyed it (4 students) and learned something important (2 students); Very interested in data analysis (2); Participating in study was fine.

Other comments alluding to the two pedagogical innovations used in the class (1. Participating in a research study; 2. Analyzing data derived from the students by using Excel) appear below:

- I love Excel; Learning to use Excel was a useful approach for learning statistics (3 students)
- Having been part of the material we were analyzing made the statistics assignment more interesting
- Would have liked more time to spend on the Statistics Assignment; 3 week class is too short
- Very helpful to work on this in-class (3) ; it wasn't as daunting as I had anticipated
- Really liked having class in Cyberquad

Discussion

Students achieved other extraordinary accomplishments, besides their increase in knowledge about conflict, mediation, and their own approaches. Previous to this class, the students had been unfamiliar with basic descriptive statistics, such as when to use the mode, mean or median to report a variable's central tendency. Although they had a healthy curiosity about the relationship between two or more variables or whether a condition or treatment resulted in an intended impact beyond what would be expected by chance, they did not know how to apply statistics to answer these types of inquiry. Remarkably, within 5 days, the ten students in 2004 and twelve students in 2005 successfully completed the intervention and the analysis, earning over 90% on the Data Analysis Assignment (see Appendix C). This accomplishment was especially miraculous in the 2004 term because their computer work was fraught with frustration because of malfunctioning computers. When one student's machine froze without his/her work being saved, their team mates re-did the analyses and mailed each other more updated Excel files. Group solidarity, although an unintended result, was most definitely a positive effect. The computer lab in 2005 posed fewer technology hurdles. Furthermore, the students remained invested in their learning and understood the purpose and steps involved in evaluating social work practice.

A closer look at the measurement instruments and the procedure for grading the Conflict Knowledge Test is recommended before the reader can assume that the conflict mediation sessions were responsible for participants' gain in knowledge and personal awareness of their conflict style. The pre-post one group design is weak in internal validity because it generally does not rule out rival explanations for change/positive outcomes. Campbell and Stanley's classic discussion highlights the possibility that outside events (history), familiarity with the testing instruments, maturation of the participants, and instrumentation are plausible factors which could result in change, and thus, we have no assurance that the intervention was the cause for cheer. Because this pre-experiment occurred over two days, the threats of maturation and history are minimized. However, the testing and instrumentation threats have not been controlled through the design. This researcher was responsible for grading the Conflict Knowledge Test pre- and post-intervention. If this SOTL study is again replicated, the researcher plans to ask the Conflict Mediation presenter to grade the tests independently without informing her whether the answers are from the pre-test or post-test. If there is inter-rater reliability for this measure, it will reassure the reader that experimental bias was not a problem in this study.

References

- Bogal, R. B., & Singer, M. J. (1981). Research course work in the baccalaureate social work curriculum: A study. *Journal of Education for Social Work, 17*(2), 45-50.
- Dunlap, K. M. (1993). A history of research in social work education: 1915-1991. *Journal of Social Work Education, 29*, 293-301.
- Epstein, I. (1987). Pedagogy of the perturbed: Teaching research to the reluctant. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 1*(1), 71-89.
- Green, R. G., Bretzin, A., Leininger, C., & Stauffer, R. (2001). Research learning attributes of graduate students in social work, psychology, and business. *Journal of Social Work Education, 37*, 333-341.
- Lawson, T. R., & Berleman, W. C. (1982). Research in the undergraduate curriculum: A survey. *Journal of Education for Social Work, 18*(4), 86-93.
- Montcalm, D. M. (1999). Applying Bandura's theory of self-efficacy to the teaching of research. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 19*(1/2), 93-107.
- Poulin, J. (1989). Goals for undergraduate social work research: A survey of BSW program directors. *Journal of Social Work Education, 25*, 284-289.
- Ramachandran, P., & De Sousa, D. (1985). Teaching of social work research: Some reflections. *Indian Journal of Social Work, 46*, 389-398.
- Royse, D. (1995). *Research methods in social work*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Royse, D., & Rompf, E. L. (1992). Math anxiety: A comparison of social work and non-social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education, 28*, 270-277.
- Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. (1997). *Research methods for social workers*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Secret, M., Ford, J., Rompf, E.L. (2003). Undergraduate research courses: A closer look reveals complex social work student attitudes. *Journal of Social Work Education, 39* (3), on-line for members (however no page numbers were provided).
- Wainstock, S. L. (1994). Swimming against the current: Teaching research methodology to reluctant social work students. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 9*(1/2), 3-16.