



# Policy In Action: Using Reflection of Experiences to Teach Social Welfare Policy

Marshelia D. Harris, DSW, LCSW, CYC-P

Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Indiana University Northwest, 3400 Broadway, United States.

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**\*Corresponding Author:** Marshelia D. Harris, DSW, LCSW, CYC-P, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Indiana University Northwest, 3400 Broadway, United States.

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## Abstract

Teaching social welfare policy to undergraduate students can be challenging, especially when students are not excited about the subject matter or express discontent for the course. Instructors may struggle with creating assignments that are engaging and informative. Students report not having a solid policy foundation or not being prepared to incorporate policy practice skills outside of the classroom. This case report discusses the use of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) to teach social welfare policy. Students gain the ability to share real world experiences with each other and to identify common areas of interest. Robust classroom discussions afford students an opportunity to understand concepts and ideas while good debates provide an option to showcase knowledge and demonstrate critical thinking skills. These teaching methods take into consideration the needs of the diverse learners and allow the instructor the flexibility to incorporate different teaching methods to address the learning styles of all students. In recognition of the student's aptitude and limited policy experiences, the content of the policy course should focus on students developing beginning policy practice skills.

**Keywords:** BSW Education, Experiential Learning, Social Change, Social Justice, Community,

## Introduction

Social welfare policy courses at the undergraduate level are designed to teach students beginning skills in analyzing local, state, and federal policies or programs that affect citizen well-being. The intent of the course is to enhance students' understanding of the complexity of policy formation, policy activities, advocacy, implementation, and evaluation. Students learn how to increase their ability and confidence in shaping or modifying policies to meet citizens' needs and build policy making skills [1]. Students are introduced to the legislative process through the exploration of the social welfare delivery system; the course teaches policy analysis, a policy framework, and policy practice skills. Beginning policy practice skills include advocating for social issues, attentiveness to the problem, identifying the population requiring services, and coalition building. The social welfare policy practice course is the second level of policy for junior level students

and is a continuation from the introductory policy course that students take in their sophomore year [2].

Teaching policy to undergraduate students is challenging, especially when students are not excited about the subject matter or express discontent for the class. This perception about the class is usually based on the student's interest in direct practice as opposed to macro work. In recognition of the student's aptitude and limited policy experiences, the focus of the course is for students to develop beginning policy practice skills to work toward social change congruent with social work ethics. Students learn about social and economic justice through experiential learning within and outside of the classroom. Experiential learning, as explained by Kolb [3], allows students to use the skills and knowledge gained in the classroom to discover new methods or solutions to problems. By moving outside of the classroom and into the community, students learn about existing social policy issues and can see policy in action [4].

Kolb's [3] Cycle of Experiential Learning identifies four components: 1) concrete experience, 2) reflective observation, 3) abstract conceptualization, and 4) active experimentation. Concrete experience is an authentic situation, and reflective observation is the ability to look at something and think about a past or present connection. Abstract conceptualization is the ability to look beyond the standards and think outside of the box. Active experimentation allows room for discovery and making mistakes. Incorporating Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning will help to 1) explore the content area of the course; 2) examine teaching approaches; 3) assess the developmental level of the student learner; 4) review an evaluation strategy for teaching and student learning; and 5) include issues of diversity. Even though Kolb's work was first published in 1984, many researchers still cite it and build on it for their own research [5, 6]. The goal for this course is to teach the students how to influence social policy within the classroom and the community. Students will build critical thinking skills, develop solutions, and learn how to interact with residents, grassroots advocates, and leaders. This is accomplished through small assignments and a group project.

Working toward social change congruent with social work ethics and the profession's commitment to social and economic justice is the content for teaching social welfare policy. Analyzing social welfare

policies and delivery systems using different frameworks places emphasis on critical thinking and applying policy practice skills. Students use their skills to understand and influence global, national, state, local, and agency policies that affect delivery of social services in local communities. The course develops policy analysis and policy practice skills within the context of social work ethics and the profession's commitment to social and economic justice.

## Materials and Methods

An examination of different teaching approaches uncovered a range of assignments and methods used to teach social welfare policy to undergraduate students. Shdaimah [7] used documentaries to teach social welfare policy in the social work classroom to help students better understand the perspectives of those who are affected by social policy. The idea is to provide real experience that can be used in the field once the student graduates. Henman [8] examined stimulating student interest in social welfare policy by explicitly connecting it with professional social work practice, introducing an assessment exercise that involved visiting Parliament House, and undertaking weekly "hot policy topic" small group discussions. Iverson [9] identified social welfare policy as cultural values in action and discusses how it is related to assisting others in the form of creating laws and programs. Narrative literature presents a culture of values and has a strong context of historical and cultural references. MacDonald [10] introduces a social welfare policy practice and skill building assignment to Christian social workers about the controversial topic of HIV/AIDS and its relationship with the LGBT community. This assignment was designed to assist Christian social work students in developing competent practice skills by confronting their values and beliefs. The focus was to explore the requirements of the profession by maintaining integrity and balance of their religious and social work values. These teaching methods use aspects of Kolb's [3] Cycle of Experiential Learning, in the process of engagement they create through providing students with concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In Spanish business education classes, researchers tested the effectiveness of experiential learning and found that "getting involved in experience-based practices and managerial simulations constitutes an effective approach to develop their competencies [6]. In their review of the use of Kolb's experiential learning theory in pursuit of helping students develop their leadership skills, Kiersch & Peters [5] cite many studies that support its effectiveness.

Resonating with this writer's perspective of teaching, Lowman stated "Effective teaching must create intellectual excitement and establish interpersonal rapport" [11]. The ability to stimulate the minds of students, to teach them to think beyond the textbook, develop critical thinking skills, and to link the context to their world is an integrative approach that is empowering for students.

Even though lecturing and explaining is the most common teaching method used in most university settings [12], it is not the most effective because it encourages passive learning and does not keep the student engaged in the information being shared. Using a reflection of concrete experiences, robust classroom discussions, good debates, and student involvement, as opposed to students just taking notes, can create a stronger learning environment. Reflection of concrete experiences allows students the ability to share real world experience with each other and to identify common areas of interest. Reflective observations come through robust classroom discussions and abstract conceptualization, which afford students an opportunity to understand concepts and ideas and provide an option to showcase knowledge and demonstrate critical thinking skills. Active experimentation comes through assignments that allow students to interact in the "real world." These teaching methods take into consideration the needs of the adult learner and allow the instructor the flexibility to incorporate different teaching methods to address the learning style of all students [3].

Reflection is used on the first day of class, concrete experiences and reflective observations are initiated with a general question such as, "What is your experience with social policy?" This question will garner a few responses, but most students are quiet. This question is usually followed by, "Explain how social policy is relevant to the work we do as social workers." The discussion leads to students reflecting on their experiences and trying to connect the experiences with policy. To decrease the instructor's role as discussion leader and expert of the subject matter, a student is selected to start the discussion, then that student will select the next student to continue the discussion. This method engages the student in the discussion process and provides an opportunity for all to participate without feeling pressured to volunteer. This is an invitation by peers to participate in the class discussion and respects those students that are introverts because it allows more time for processing their answers and reactions. Extroverts are not allowed to take over the discussion and must demonstrate some level of patience while the introvert takes time to think about a response.

## Developmental Level of the Learner

The development level of the learner is undergraduate junior level students in a social welfare policy course. Assignments and activities are designed to assist students with expanding their knowledge base and understanding the policy language. To assist the students with learning the concepts and language of policy, students will complete low risk assignments to build their knowledge and skills and begin the process of abstract conceptualization. There are two main assignments to facilitate students' learning through reflection on experience. These assignments include the discussion of the "letters" from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and a project on a social issue that is linked to an actual bill in the statehouse. To support these assignments, there are scaffolded steps consisting of locating legislative bills, selecting a social issue linked to a bill, visiting the statehouse, watching the progress of the bill, and presenting the group project.

These assignments support active experimentation in practical application activities such as policy language exercises that use a crossword puzzle to define social work terminology and assist students with articulating definitions with examples, and students roleplaying by calling their local legislative office to discuss a particular social issue, as the social worker representing community residents with a problem. Students learn to build critical thinking skills by asking questions and exploring solutions with local leaders. The purpose of these assignments is to help students to build and apply practical policy skills, to empower students with knowledge of the legislative process, and to understand the client systems served. The activities and assignments have helped students to build confidence in contacting policy leaders, expand knowledge of the policy process, and seek solutions through research. Students increased the ability to advocate for an identified need for a specific group of people.

In week two of the semester, two documents are introduced, "A Letter from the Birmingham Jail" by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. [13] and the "Letter from the Eight Clergymen" [14] which are referred to as the "letters" from this point forward. The "letters" are used as a pedagogical tool to help students understand social policy in a "real world," concrete context. Students learn about the content and context of the historical events that occurred in 1963 and how the past connects to current social issues. The discussion leads to a review of the context of social work from the beginning to the present day. In most cases, the historical reference provides students with a foundation for the progression in social work and connects well to the "letters." The purpose of the assignment is to provide students with content and context of the relevance of historical events that occurred in 1963 with the current

social welfare issues. Students gain a better perspective of the policy activities and begin to recognize social issues through discussion of the actions that took place in 1963, and the connection to the development of the Civil Rights Act.

This assignment is designed for students to understand the impact of social welfare policies and programs on individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Students learn how to identify the stakeholders and the agitators in the “letters” and discuss the effect the social issues had on the incident that led up to the writing of the “letters.”

To facilitate this discussion, students are divided into groups of three or four depending on the class size for a 15 to 20-minute discussion about the “letters” and to identify policy issues. Each group identifies a recorder and a spokesman and will report out their findings in the larger class. The discussion is rich in diversity of thought and awareness, and in some instances unawareness, about the amount of policy located in the “letters.” Individually, students then complete five critical questions to measure their critical thinking and policy practice skills as it relates to understanding the influence of social welfare policy in the delivery of services at the global, national, state, and local level. The five questions are:

1. “We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized.” Based on the assigned readings, what is this statement referring to?
2. What are the four basic steps of facilitating a nonviolent campaign? Discuss how each step was addressed in the letters.
3. Discuss and explain two of the four policy practice activities present in the letters.
4. How can beginning policy practice skills influence the development of social policy within the broader community?
5. Provide an explanation of the statement, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

The answers to the five questions will set the foundation for analyzing policy and policy practice and build the scaffolding process for the course.

In week three, the process for locating legislative bills is demonstrated in class. The instructor opens the general assembly website and provides the students with instructions for locating bills in the senate and house chambers. An explanation is provided about the difference between active and inactive bills, and how to select bills based on current activity and progression of the bill. This process allows students to get familiar with the website and locate a bill. Students see the introduction of the bill, identify the author of the bill, and read the fiscal statement attached to the bill.

Students participate in a general discussion about the legislative process and questions are answered. After the discussion, two or three students are randomly selected to lead the class in finding legislative bills. These classroom activities connect to the teaching method of training and coaching (Davis as cited in Anatas, 2013, p. 33) because it engages the students by providing hands-on skills with understanding the legislative process and locating information. The instructor directs the student through the process of navigating the website and the class will assist when students struggle with the required steps or forget how to proceed. This activity helps the student to become confident with the process of locating legislative bills and articulating the steps to the rest of the class.

Weeks four and five consist of each student group identifying one or two legislative bills and possible project ideas. In week six, the students submit a group outline about the selected topic and the corresponding legislative bill to support the topic. The group outline includes the selection of a social issue, an overview of the legislative bill, the relationship between the social issue and the legislative bill,

a project idea, and a potential date and time to complete the project. In this stage, students are using the teaching method of using groups and teams to divide the workload and to build trust with the group members. Group activities may include scheduling meetings with community members and professionals, gathering qualitative and quantitative data, reviewing historical documents, and identifying a physical or virtual location for implementing the project.

In week seven, students in the spring semester of the course visit the Statehouse to participate in the Legislative, Advocacy, Education, and Development (LEAD) Day rally sponsored by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Students network with other social work students, meet with legislators, and gain more knowledge about the selected bill through the legislator’s perspective. Students can schedule individual or group meetings with legislators ahead of time or meet during the rally. This is a great event because it allows students to visit a formal setting that most have never participated in and to see policy working in the government setting. For those students in the fall section of the course, a visit to the Statehouse does not occur. However, legislators are invited to visit the classroom in person or virtually. Students ask questions about bills and get personal insight from the legislator.

In week eight, students are watching the progression of the bill through the legislature and determining the best way to present the bill in the final presentation. Following the bill is crucial at this stage because the bill may survive, or it may die during the legislative session. Depending on the number of bills introduced, whether it is a long or short session for the legislators, and the support of the bill, there is a strong possibility the bill may not progress and get enough support for passing. This process is referred to as the bill “dying” during the legislative session. If this happens, students have the choice of selecting a new bill or discussing the implications of the dying bill. This process connects to the teaching method of inquiry and discovery. Students are following the process of a bill from the time it is introduced and observing each step the bill takes in the process. Students learn how to ask questions about the process and will discover how passing a bill is not guaranteed, and the importance of learning about the incremental steps that are involved in the process.

In weeks nine and ten, the students have secured a date for implementing, introducing, or conducting their group project. The time and place for the project is posted through a discussion link in Canvas, the learning management system. The projects may take place on campus with approval and permission from student services, off-campus with approval from the necessary entity or person, or virtually. The group should demonstrate how the project influences state policy, provide the group’s position on social issues, and the action steps related to the legislative bill.

As group members, students identify their role within the group and the project, solidify a date, place, and time for executing the project, and record the results for the group presentation at the end of the semester. At this stage, students should schedule interviews with local community members and leaders, professionals in the field, and potential stakeholders to gather information about the perceived social problem. This is also a stage for clarification of the goals and objectives, the target population served, and the expected results of the project.

In weeks eleven and twelve, students are putting the finishing touches on the group presentation and preparing to present in week thirteen. This is a time for students to review the outcomes of the project, to identify areas of strength and weaknesses, and to practice their presentation. Building good presentation skills will help students to articulate information in an engaging manner and encourage other students to ask questions. Time is provided to the students within the classroom and outside of the classroom to finalize the project.



In week thirteen, students present the group project and answer the questions provided at the beginning of the course. Each presentation is allotted fifteen to twenty minutes and requires each group member to present one section of the presentation. This allows for accountability and balance within the group. Students are required to answer questions at the end of the presentation and to make corrections to their slides before submitting the slides by the end of the day. This provides students with time to review and to adjust the slides as needed. The instructor grades the project and presentation based on the rubric [15] provided to the student ahead of the due date of the presentation.

Week fourteen allows the student time to finish the final paper and to study for the final exam. Students will submit the paper in week fifteen and complete the final exam in week sixteen.

### CSWE Competencies

The two primary assignments, the discussion of the “letters” from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the group project presentation on the social issues linked to a legislative bill, and the scaffold assignments assist students in building knowledge and skills by demonstrating the competencies outlined by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) including:

Competency 3: Engage diversity and difference in practice by being inclusive of the needs of the learner.

Competency 4: Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice through identifying individual and community social welfare issues

Competency 5: Engage in policy practice because students learn how to review policy in relationships to practice and research through assessment and critical thinking.

Competency 6: Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities because students are gaining hands-on experience by working at the micro and macro level,

Competency 7: Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities because students are learning how to address the social issues present within communities.

The rubric used to grade the final paper, and the presentation includes sections on the organization of the research, evidence of the CSWE competencies, overview of the selected legislative bill, communication with legislators, and grammatical structure. Students are graded on a scale of one to five based on depth and breath of the information discussed and provided in the paper and group presentation.

### Issues of Cultural Diversity

Iverson [9] identifies narrative literature as being steeped in personal stories that can produce emotions that run the gamut. The “letters” invoke the same type of emotions as it relates to race, ethnicity, social economic class, and the treatment of oppressed and marginalized individuals. The “letters” expose the students to the issue of diversity in several ways, from the historical context, policy activities, the social issues, and the many “isms” (classism, sexism, racism, and ageism) that are present. The “letters” discuss the issue of privilege and how that impacts the client system being served. Students confront their personal views and values as it relates to the individuals and families impacted by the racial tensions and issues in 1963, by comparing the historical events with current social issues. Students identify strategies for using policy practice skills to work with diverse clients and communities.

On average the social welfare policy class consists of 24 students, 45% people of color and 55% white students. The university sits in the middle of an urban city with about 1/3 of the students living in urban areas and the rest of the students traveling from rural communities. Depending on the students’ age, many of them are only familiar with

other groups of people through the television and from family narratives. Students use their personal experiences about classism, racism, sexism, and ageism, and how it affects their relationships with family members, loved ones, and peers, to identify with other peers. In class, students are allowed to defend their positions and ideas about beliefs, morals, and values, and the importance of acknowledging how these ideologies may help or hinder the ability to provide quality services to clients in the field.

### Teaching Reflection

Evaluation is a critical element for influencing the learning and motivation of teachers and students. This area is also a struggle for many educators because of the perceived complexity of using an evaluation tool to measure the students’ learning. While I did not conduct a formal research study, I thought it would be useful to reflect on students’ grades and comments on the evaluations. I reviewed and compared the grades from previous semesters for the signature assignment. The average grade on this assignment in 2019 was 75%, which is a C in our program’s grading scheme. Because social work is a professional school, a C is the lowest grade (for the overall final grade) that a student can earn and remain in the program. After instituting the above teaching methods in 2020, students earned an average score of 26 out of 30, which is a B+ in our BSW program grading scheme. I also examined the comments in the Student Evaluations of Teaching. I noted that in 2019 there were many comments about how this was a hard class, whereas in 2020 the only complaints were about the pandemic in general. For the numeric data, while limited in reliability and validity, the scores in 2020 were over 4.5 on a 5-point (with 5 being the most positive response) scale.

In my observations, it appeared that the students were building policy practice skills and bonding over policy terminology and assignments. The workshops sparked good conversations and trust among the students. The students were using policy language without realizing it and learning how to recognize policy issues.

### Conclusion

Teaching social welfare policy to BSW students can be a challenge due to students being disinterested or unfamiliar with the subject matter. Using Kolb’s Cycle of Experiential Learning Theory as the preferred teaching method takes into consideration the needs of the adult learner and allows the instructor the ability to introduce different teaching strategies. Evaluation of students is based on a learning-centered approach, allowing students to grow professionally and intellectually. Students are introduced to the “letters” to learn about the historical aspects of policy and how it is relevant to the social issues of today. Students discuss culture and diversity through conversation, assignments, and activities. Confronting personal values and views and understanding the requirements of the profession assist students in learning how to work with diverse populations.

**Competing Interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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