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An Innovative Approach to Helping Students Overcome Bottlenecks in Social Work Education Using Self-Study

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An Innovative Approach to Helping Students Overcome Bottlenecks
in Social Work Education Using Self-Study

by

Jeanne Goins Dulworth

A Banded Dissertation
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor in Social Work

St. Catherine University - University of St. Thomas
School of Social Work

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Abstract

This banded dissertation focuses on a new teaching method called Decoding the Disciplines Model and how it can be used to help students move past difficult concepts. The conceptual framework through which this model will be applied also includes a comprehensive self-study and the use of reflection in the classroom. When using this model and framework, educators can improve student learning as well as become more informed educators. The banded dissertation contains three products.

The first product is a manuscript which makes the case for the Decoding the Disciplines Model to help students become unstuck on concepts, theories, or ideas in social work education, which has not occurred before. The conceptual framework paper makes the case for using the model with the addition of reflection and a comprehensive self-study. The author contends that utilizing the three parts together will result in more informed teaching.

The second product is a scholarly personal narrative of a Qualitative Self-Study Research Project. The self-study was conducted in an undergraduate social work diversity course, where students have, in the past, had a difficult time admitting to implicit biases they hold. After using the above described conceptual framework, the author found students were more engaged in the course and could articulate their biases within three weeks of beginning the course.

The third product is a review of a peer-reviewed conference at the 36th Annual Baccalaureate Program Directors Conference, held in Jacksonville, FL in March of 2019. The professional presentation was a combination of an explanation of the two manuscripts and presenting how the expanded model had been used in courses. Participants also shared bottlenecks they have discovered within social work education, offering the author suggestions for further research.
After completing the three products, four results were discovered. First, the expanded model can and should be used in social work education. Next, reflection is a necessary part of the process to become a fully informed teacher. The faculty member utilizing the model must be sure she or he discovers the exact bottleneck, rather than making assumptions. And finally, the process of a self-study can be vulnerable but also provides a wealth of information about one’s teaching.
Dedication

I dedicate this to my parents John and Bev Goins who were my first and most influential teachers. Dad, I know you will be with me as I cross the stage. I miss you more than words can express. I also dedicate this to my husband Richard who has changed my life and helped me to become the person I am today. You have been my rock through this tumultuous process and for the past 21 years. I dedicate this to my foster children. No matter what the future holds, I will always love you Serenity, Zoey, Riley, and Grace.
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An Innovative Approach to Helping Students Overcome Bottlenecks in Social Work Education Using Self-Study

Social work educators have quite a challenge before them. They must prepare students to work with the most vulnerable members of society, arming them with essential values, skills, and knowledge so students are able help clients find their voices. While it is mandated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) for faculty to cover the major areas of social work education, including Policy; Human Behavior in the Social Environment; Micro, Mezzo, and Macro Practice; Research; and Field Experience, students must also learn to look within, noticing how they feel and reflecting on outcomes. The focus of this banded dissertation is the application of a new teaching model to enhance best practices in social work education and the use of self-study of the teacher while using this model.

Pace and Middendorf (2004) developed an innovative way of helping teachers to help students when they become stuck on a topic. The word bottleneck has been used and applied to multiple disciplines from math to psychology. In most areas, a bottleneck is used to describe a phenomenon which occurs when there is a halt to learning or understanding. Pace and Middendorf (2004) developed a model which teachers can utilize when students become stuck or hindered in their thinking, which they call a bottleneck. By using the model, teachers can develop a way to enable students to move past the bottleneck and continue to think and learn.

A bottleneck is a topic or idea that students have difficulty understanding. For example, many policy students find it difficult to make the connection between policy and the time when policy was created or changed. Pace and Middendorf (2004) would encourage faculty to use their Decoding the Disciplines Model to help students make this critical connection. Their bottleneck model involves a seven-step process which faculty can use in classes. The goal of the
seven steps is to help faculty correctly identify which concept is confusing for students, identify how practitioners address similar problems in practice, and to enable faculty to create innovative methods to teach students so they overcome the bottleneck.

The specific steps include discovering the bottleneck in the classroom, discovering how experts in the field would address the issue, determining which intellectual skills must be taught, having the students practice the skills, learning what will motivate students, measuring the students’ ability to master skills, and sharing knowledge with the field. While this approach has not been used in social work courses, it has been utilized by other disciplines, leaving much room for research within the field of social work (Pace & Middendorf, 2004). One exciting aspect of the Decoding the Disciplines Model is that faculty use creativity when deciding which metaphor to use with students to correct the bottleneck. When faculty allow themselves time to be creative, help students move past the bottleneck, and most importantly, reflect on their own learning about teaching, the model has served its purpose.

When educators use the model, they can help students understand and move past places where they couldn’t without the help of the model. In addition to using this model, if an educator takes the arduous step of also completing a self-study, he or she will also be able to see how his or her teaching style impacted student learning and how he or she can continue to improve as an educator.

There are several reasons one might believe the Decoding the Disciplines Model should be used in social work curriculum. The Council on Social Work Education has changed to a competency based model (EPAS, 2015). Students must now model and demonstrate practice behaviors within classes. Competence-based education has occurred in several disciplines, including nursing, physical therapy, and athletic training. Yeo (2017) teaches in athletic training,
which recently became a competency-based curriculum. Yeo et al. (2017) found that using the Decoding the Disciplines Model to inform curricular changes not only enhanced student learning but also decreased student anxiety as they worked during field experiences. Yeo and colleagues are now conducting a longitudinal study. As EPAS curricular changes are among all social work faculty, the bottleneck model could enhance and inform curriculum. There are also other social work theories which lend themselves well to the Decoding the Disciplines Model.

This banded dissertation contains three products, which include a conceptual paper, a semester-long self-study utilizing the bottleneck model resulting in a paper of experiences, and a national presentation which explains how the Decoding the Disciplines Model can be infused into social work curriculum to enhance best practices in social work education. Because there is so little research on the model there are many questions which can be addressed over a larger program of research. This is simply the beginning of using both the Decoding the Disciplines Model and self-reflection in social work education.

**Conceptual Framework**

The intersection between how a student can understand a new concept and how the teacher learns from this experience is the core of this conceptual framework. Through both using the model and self-reflection, educators can help themselves and their students. Learning and overcoming bottlenecks comes alive in the classroom and teachers note AHA moments as students gain confidence and competence.

While some professors today may see self-reflection as a softer and less important way of addressing and assessing one’s teaching, Dewey saw reflection as a living and working mechanism based on the scientific model to help educators think critically about their work. His model was a cognitive six-step model to address discussion and problem solving. Dewey was
considered by many to be one of the greatest philosophers and educators of his time. I use the reflection aspect of Dewey’s work in my doctoral dissertation as an example of the fact that scholars have been concerned with reflection for years.

Dewey’s work was influenced by several aspects. First, the scientific model began to ask for a consistent process to explain hypotheses and information. This had an enormous impact on his work. Dewey’s work was the first of its kind that asked educators to be more thoughtful, reflective, and what we might call today mindful about what and how educators present new material to students. This reflective piece was utilized in my dissertation proposal. Dewey was also a noted philosopher and educator. His experiences within the classroom (from 1884-1930) and in speeches informed his work and influenced his theory. His experiences in education informed his work with students and led to his numerous models on teaching. Dewey was also a prolific writer who produced over 1,000 works, most of which were examples of mistakes that occur in the classroom and suggestions for correcting them. His passion for education was a guiding force for his work. His work was also influenced by psychologist William James. Both wrote on the interplay between experiences in life and how these experiences impact both learners and teachers. It is evident that Dewey was a life-long learner who cared greatly about the profession of education (Jordan, 2015).

Social workers must take time to reflect on their work. Practitioners must constantly ask, “is my intervention working?” and “is this agency providing the services which our mission promotes?” to maintain optimum effectiveness. Social workers must also think critically, often quickly, to offer services and knowledge to clients who are in need. Social workers must look back on decisions made to assess what worked and what did not work. Self-reflection is critical thinking. The best way to encourage social workers to engage in self-reflection is to both model
it and engage them in the process while they are still students. The enhanced conceptual framework I have used allows students to practice feeling vulnerable when they are stuck, and pride when they can move past being stuck.

I assert that social work educators must teach students to be reflective of their work within the classroom and then in practice. Therefore, it is essential that social work educators reflect on their teaching within the classroom. The model below outlines this concept.

Self-study is a process of scholarship that originated in the field of education by which a teacher uses critical analysis and scrutiny to examine his or her teaching. Per Berry (2008), a self-study enables a teacher to better understand teaching by understanding learning and thinking. Berry (2008) explained that when a teacher utilizes a self-study, he or she begins to understand his or her own pedagogy and the connection worldview and pedagogy have to education. One of the most innovative additions to my teaching toolkit has been the use of the Decoding the Disciplines Model. Once teachers combine the use of the Decoding the Disciplines Model, reflection on their teaching, and complete a self-study, they will be able to note what actually made the difference with students. I used the following questions as part of my self-study:

1. What did I do in class?
2. Why did I do it?
3. Was it successful or not?
4. What changes or improvements could be made for next time?

These questions were given to me by Laura Cruise during a teaching and learning workshop. Answering those questions each day after class provided the backbone to my self-study. While completing the self-study was a time-consuming and difficult process, the study
illuminated how using the model, self-reflection, and self-study can result in more informed teaching.

**Summary of Scholarship Products**

**Product #1**

Product Number 1 is a manuscript that informs the reader about the Decoding the Disciplines Model. As discussed above, the model involves seven steps, which can help students move past concepts where they may have been stuck. The paper includes a rationale for why the model can be helpful to both students and teachers. While the model has been used in numerous other fields of higher education, it has not been utilized in social work education.

I also describe why I believe two more steps are needed in the process to achieve informed teaching. While I think the model is wonderful, I believe that adding reflection and a qualitative self-study enhance the results as well as inform the teacher. By adding these two elements, the focus becomes both the learner and the teacher.

**Product #2**

Product Number 2 is a semester long self-assessment of a diversity course. The self-study was completed in a section of SOCW 402 Diversity in Contemporary Society class during spring 2018. It was a traditional in-person class that met two times a week for one hour and fifteen minutes. This class was chosen because it typically has about half social work majors and half students taking the course as an upper-level perspectives course for liberal studies. Out of 40 students, 24 were social work majors and there was a wide array of diversity among students. I examined the following questions:

1. What is the most effective way to help students learn they all bring preconceived notions and stereotypes to the table?
2. How can I best encourage students to identify and be willing to admit preconceived notions to become more culturally aware and competent?

3. What is a creative way that I can use the Bottleneck Model to help students become aware of and more culturally sensitive to the above questions?

While using an image of a blade of grass, I could help students understand implicit bias and preconceived notions much sooner than I had accomplished in the past. The model also helped me to change when certain content was delivered in the course to better represent how complications arise in society (one of the steps in the model).

**Product #3**

Product 3 was a culmination of the first two products. The results of the conceptual framework and the self-study were presented at a national conference. The presentation was given at the 36th Annual Baccalaureate Program Director’s (BPD) Conference on March 15, 2019. BPD is committed to enhancing social work education and field placements in undergraduate social work education. The presentation was 75 minutes long. Please see PowerPoint slides given below.

**Discussion**

After completing the three products for this banded dissertation, I noted several distinct conclusions. First, the Decoding the Disciplines Model can and should be used in social work education. Next, the use of reflection is necessary for teachers to understand what worked, what did not, and why. It is also essential for anyone using the expanded Decoding the Disciplines Model to fully and completely understand the bottleneck. If a teacher makes assumptions about or tries to guess at what is causing students to become stuck, he or she may miss the point of the
model if he or she does not understand exactly what the correct bottleneck is. Finally, one must be vulnerable during a self-study process.

The model was extended by me to help teachers not only see students through bottlenecks but to also help them to see the value in self-reflection. By using the extended model, I have become a more informed teacher and improved my ability to help students become successful. I will replicate my use of the Decoding the Disciplines Model, self-reflection, and conduct a self-study in all courses where I have discovered a bottleneck in student learning, thus leading to more informed teaching and learning. This research was the first conducted on the Decoding the Disciplines Model using social work classes. I intend to use this technique to assist other social work educators.

It is my intention to complete a few more self-studies of my own teaching using the extended Decoding the Disciplines Model. Then, I intend to complete some pre- and posttests with students using the model to see what their ideas are about the usefulness of the model. Next, I intend to complete a national search of social work educators to see what they find to be bottlenecks which they see with students in courses. Once I have this information, I will be able to work on helping others (and myself) develop solutions for said bottlenecks. My goal is to be able to have educators call me with bottlenecks they have identified, to be able to walk them through the process, and help them find ways to enable students to overcome the bottleneck. I intend to further the scholarship surrounding both the areas of self-study in social work and the Decoding the Disciplines Model in social work education.

Social work educators are often examining new pedagogical approaches to enhance student learning. I have utilized the flipped classroom, many Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs), role plays, and other techniques. Often it seems that the new teaching fads come and go
so quickly that there is not time to fully evaluate the effectiveness of each concept. Without continuous and strenuous evaluation, one never fully knows what really makes changes in student learning. Therefore, this I intend to continue to use the framework discussed above to have a chance to fully evaluate the process of using the Decoding the Disciplines Model, self-reflection, and a self-study. This will allow me to fine tune my teaching as well as evaluate student learning.

The bottleneck model has been successful with other competency-based curricula, as noted above in athletic training, and may have great potential for EPAS standards. Further, the creative nature of social work seems to fit for the use of this model. One of the steps is creating a metaphor that will illustrate the bottleneck concepts for students. Social workers spend much of their time in practice developing new ideas to help clients solve problems.

**Implications for Social Work Education**

Bottlenecks are inevitable in any educational process. All students and teachers will come across concepts, theories, or problems they are not able to move past. Social work educators have struggled with similar bottlenecks in the classroom for years. Conferences within the profession have often discussed issues like gatekeeping in social work classes, how to help students apply theory to reality, how to inform research by practice and practice by research. These are additional bottlenecks that can be addressed and improve the profession.

Bottleneck completion is not only beneficial to help students learn concepts but also to the profession at large. When students are in learning environments that force them to use critical thinking to overcome places where they have become stuck, they learn to use these mental processes for themselves. Critical thinking is one of the most essential skills a social
HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME BOTTLENECKS

worker has in his or her tool belt, thus learning how to best apply critical analysis should be taught early.

Because social workers can make critical connections between problems and solutions, they are perfect candidates to be utilizing the Decoding the Disciplines Model. Social workers can see the invisible connections between individuals, groups, and systems. This is one of the major steps in the Decoding the Disciplines Model. One must be able to accurately define the bottleneck. As social workers, one learns to use one’s intuition and listen to others. These skills are needed in the classroom to help students daily. The extended version of the model allows us to help students and use reflection to become better communicators and teachers.

There is also a need for more research with the extended Decoding the Disciplines Model. There are currently professional peer-reviewed publications on the model. Replication of the extended model will allow teachers to prove reliability and validity when helping students move past difficult concepts.

Implications for Future Research

I will replicate my use of the Decoding the Disciplines Model, self-reflection, and conduct a self-study in all courses where I have discovered a bottleneck in student learning, thus leading to more informed teaching and learning. This research was the first conducted on the Decoding the Disciplines Model using social work classes. I intend to use this technique to assist other social work educators.

It is my intention to complete a few more self-studies of my own teaching using the expanded Decoding the Disciplines Model. Then I intend to complete some pre- and posttests with students using the model to see what their ideas are about the usefulness of the model. Next, I intend to complete a national search for information from social work educators
to see what they find to be bottlenecks they see with students in courses. Once I have this information, I will be able to work on helping others develop solutions for said bottlenecks. My goal is to be able to have educators remember me, call on me with bottlenecks they have identified, and to be able to walk them through the process to help them find ways to enable students to overcome the bottleneck. I intend to further the scholarship surrounding both the areas of self-study in social work and the bottleneck model in social work education.

There is much room for the use of the Decoding the Disciplines Model within social work as well. Field supervisors can learn to use the expanded model to help field students to overcome bottlenecks in field practice. For example, students often feel uncomfortable being younger than their clients and have difficulty with self-confidence. This is an example of an area where the expanded Decoding the Disciplines Model could be utilized.

Finally, the expanded model could be used in social work practice. There are many bottlenecks that can arise in social work practice. Supervision issues, handling difficult client issues, dealing with clients’ family members, and others are common bottlenecks found within the profession. There is a place for the extended model in both social work education and social work practice.

**Conclusion**

The Decoding the Disciplines Model has been demonstrated to be effective in other fields of practice, and it is time to begin replicating the use in social work. It is essential for us to utilize the model to expand our teaching and our student learning and outcomes. The scholarship of teaching and learning will be enhanced for both students and educators once the expanded model is utilized.
Comprehensive Reference List


Yeo, M. (2017). Decoding the disciplines as a hermeneutic practice. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 150*(1), 49-62. doi:10.1002/tl.20237


Using the Decoding the Disciplines Model in Social Work Education

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Abstract

Social work educators must prepare students to work with the most vulnerable members of society, arming them with essential values, skills, and knowledge. The Decoding the Disciplines Model is a seven-step process to help students to move past difficult concepts. This paper includes my explanation of and assertion that the Decoding the Disciplines Model fits well into social work education. The focus of this conceptual paper is the benefits of the Decoding the Disciplines Model for social work faculty and students, how reflection should guide the process, and why it should be utilized in social work education. The Decoding the Disciplines Model has been successful with other competency-based curriculum and the creative nature of social work seems to be a productive fit for the use of this particular model.

Keywords: decoding the disciplines model, bottlenecks, teaching, pedagogy, reflection, higher education, competency-based education
Using the Bottleneck Model in Social Work Education

Social work educators have quite a challenge. They must prepare students to work with the most vulnerable member of society, arming them with essential values, skills, and knowledge so students can help clients find their voices. While CSWE mandates coverage of the major areas of social work education, students must also learn to look within, noticing how they feel and reflecting on outcomes. This paper addresses the problem faculty have when students become stuck on a concept or idea and are unable to move beyond. I also discuss the application of a teaching model to enhance best practices in social work education and the use of reflection and self-study of the teacher while using this model.

Faculty often come across students’ struggles. Pace and Middendorf (2004) developed an innovative way of helping teachers to support students when they become stuck on a topic. The word bottleneck has been used and applied to multiple disciplines from math to psychology. In most areas, bottleneck is used to describe a phenomenon which occurs when there is a halt to learning or understanding. Pace and Middendorf (2004) developed a model teachers can utilize when students become fixed or hindered in their thinking, which they call a bottleneck. By using the Decoding the Disciplines Model, teachers can develop a way to enable students to move past the bottleneck and continue to think and learn.

Once faculty discover the bottleneck, they can work through the model. For example, many policy students find it difficult to make the connection between policy and the time when the policy was created or changed. Pace and Middendorf (2004) would encourage faculty to use their Decoding the Disciplines Model to help students make this critical connection. Their Decoding the Disciplines Model involves a seven-step process faculty can use in classes. The goal of the seven steps is to help faculty correctly identify which concept is confusing students,
identify how practitioners address similar problems in practice, and enable faculty to create innovative methods to overcome the bottleneck. The specific steps include (a) discovering the bottleneck in the classroom, (b) discovering how experts in the field would address the issue, (c) determining which intellectual skills must be taught, (d) having the students practice the skills, (e) learning what will motivate students and measuring the students’ ability to master skills, and (f) sharing knowledge with the field (please see Appendix).

While this approach has not been used in social work courses, it has been utilized by other disciplines, leaving much room for research within the field of social work (Pace & Middendorf, 2004). One exciting aspect of the bottleneck model is that faculty creatively decide which metaphor to use with students to correct the bottleneck. When faculty allow themselves time to be creative, help students move past the bottleneck, and most importantly, reflect on their own learning about teaching, the model has served its purpose.

There are several reasons to recommend the use of Decoding the Disciplines Model in social work curriculum. The Council on Social Work Education has changed to a competency-based model (EPAS, 2015). Students must now model and demonstrate practice behaviors often within classes and field practicum. Competence-based education has occurred in several disciplines, including nursing, physical therapy, and athletic training. Yeo (2017) teaches in athletic training, which recently became a competency-based curriculum. Yeo et al. (2017) found that using the Decoding the Disciplines Model to inform curricular changes not only enhanced student learning but also decreased student anxiety as they worked during field experiences. Yeo and colleagues are now conducting a longitudinal study. As EPAS curricular changes are occurring to align with the 2015 standards, the bottleneck model could enhance and inform curriculum.
Social workers are problem solvers. They meet clients, make assessments, and empower clients to make positive changes in their lives. The Decoding the Disciplines Model fits well into the problem-solving practice model. Because social workers help to solve problems each day, faculty can model these behaviors within the classroom. As more social work faculty learn about the Decoding the Disciplines Model, they can help students to move beyond difficult concepts. Faculty can enhance this process using reflection.

In this conceptual paper, I describe the Decoding the Disciplines Model and its implications for social work education. Doing so can assist faculty to understand the model and tools necessary to help students with bottlenecks within the classroom and field education.

The Decoding the Disciplines Model

The Decoding the Disciplines Model Explained

As discussed above, in the Decoding the Disciplines Model there are seven steps to the process. Pace and Middendorf (2004) developed the Decoding the Disciplines Model for two specific reasons. First, they saw that students had better success when they could think across disciplines or in a multidisciplinary way. Second, they wanted to develop a way to encourage faculty to help students when they became stuck on a concept or application of a concept. The model has six steps that involve working on pedagogy and assisting students and one step that encourages faculty to share their results. Pace and Middendorf noted that often faculty wish their students had deeper levels of critical thinking. They stressed that many faculty focus on new pedagogical techniques rather than focusing on the end result of enhanced student learning. The following is a description of the steps along with an example that I have used in my classroom.

The first step. The faculty member needs to discover where students are becoming stuck and think about the nature of why students become stuck. The more precise a teacher can be
about the exact nature of the bottleneck, the more easily he or she can work through the remaining steps. I noticed a bottleneck in my upper level undergraduate Diversity in Contemporary Society class. The class is open to all students and typically contains an even mix of social work majors and other students from varied fields. I noticed that the social work students came into the class and stated they were open to all types of diversity during the first class. I think this is because the students wanted to present themselves as good social work students who were following the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. In reality, it was not until almost the end of the semester that the students were able to admit that they actually did have biases and preconceived notions about those who are different than themselves. The bottleneck model was used to help students realize much sooner that it is all right to admit to their feelings in an honest way without feeling like they are not good enough for social work.

**The second step.** This step is about uncovering the mental tasks, which is to ask how an expert in the field would move past the bottleneck. Per Pace and Middendorf (2004), “this step requires metacognition” (p. 5). The faculty member must discern how an expert in the field completes the task without thinking, almost like how a professional athlete uses muscle memory. I spent several hours researching experts in the field of diversity through readings, videos, and other methods and discovered themes that experts discussed with explaining their stories. The first theme that arose was the concept of white privilege. In the past, I had waited until later in the semester to discuss this concept, thinking it may be too much to swallow early in the semester. Second, after conducting readings of local authors, I discovered the theme of economic disparity and the profound impacts within the Appalachian Mountains, where my school is located. The final theme that arose was related to religious beliefs. Most of the
students in the class were from the local region and had been raised in the Baptist church. After thinking about these themes, I knew adjustments had to be made to the course to help students both recognize and appreciate their past experiences and also feel safe enough to share their beliefs.

**The third step.** This requires the professor to determine whether he or she can explain the tasks to students in a way they can comprehend. Repetition is often necessary for students to be able to move past the bottleneck. This step often requires creative thinking from the professor. I knew this step was achievable because others in social work education accomplish it. I reconsidered the course as well as the Council on Social Work Education’s EPAS standards.

**The fourth step.** In this step, the professor is to think about how students’ work will practice the skills and how they will receive feedback about their progress. Faculty must think about how students can be measured to show progress as they move past the bottleneck. I decided to change the order of the syllabus and class. I now discuss what students bring to the class much earlier, explaining the concepts of white privilege and the influences of religion within the first three weeks. I also added a reflective journal to the course. This journal includes weekly questions related to feelings about what is learned, rather than content. And finally, I use the metaphor of a camera lens in just about every class. I discuss how the focus can change everything about beliefs. As one uses a camera to widen the focus, one may see things from many ways, while when one is too close and focused on an object it can be hard to see the surrounding environments. I had students take photos using this concept throughout the semester to add to their journals. Journals and photos were taken up every two weeks and feedback was provided to students about their learning.
The fifth step. This involves motivating the students. I have seen how motivation and a partnership with students can encourage success. Students respond to their own success, so helping them move past the bottleneck is key. This step was much easier for me than I had anticipated. Students wanted to have a better understanding about the course materials and how they related to themselves. Many students used their parents’ older cameras for the assignment and found this to be a truly fun way to see the world in a different way. I also worked hard to provide meaningful feedback to students. Students often motivated each other by sharing their photos and thoughts in class, resulting in deeper critical analysis of the course content. This was accomplished during designated share days during the semester.

The sixth step. Here, the professor monitors how well the students can master the new learning tasks. Much forethought must be put into this step to find the best measurement tool to determine student success. Several faculty members have used Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) as described by Angelo and Cross (1993). As mentioned above, I came up with a different technique than a CAT to measure success, but I am currently working on CATs for students to complete as part of their journals.

The final step. The last step is one that is important to any profession. This is where faculty must decide how to disseminate their findings with other professionals. A few ways this can be accomplished are through publications, presentations, and sharing with colleagues in a less formal way. I intend both to publish and present on this topic in several arenas. Once a faculty member understands the above-mentioned steps, he or she can utilize the bottleneck model in the classroom.
Decoding the Disciplines Model in Social Work Education

The Decoding the Disciplines Model is a model that can work well in social work education. Faculty who use this pedagogy will be implementing skills from competency-based teaching, problem-solving practice models, and using reflection, resulting in better-prepared students for the practice of social work. Proper reflection on these skills will enhance self-awareness, teaching, and learning.

The Decoding the Disciplines Model has been successful with other competency-based curricula as noted above in athletic training, and may have great potential for EPAS standards. Further, the creative nature of social work seems to lend itself to the use of this model. One of the steps is creating a metaphor which will illustrate the bottleneck concepts for students. Social workers spend much of their time in practice developing new ideas to help clients solve problems. The paper also offers examples of how social work faculty can implement the bottleneck model into different courses. I note the importance of self-reflection and student reflection (via CATs) and how they can guide the process.

Reflection in the Process of the Decoding the Disciplines Model

Social workers must take time to reflect on their work. Is my intervention working? Is this agency providing the services which our mission promotes? Am I using the most up-to-date evidenced-based techniques with my clients? Why or why not? Am I able to gain rapport with all or most of my clients quickly? How can I do better? Will this proposed legislation help or hurt people in my region? If so, what can I do about it? These are only a tiny representation of questions social workers ask themselves daily. Self-reflection is critical thinking. The best way to encourage social workers to engage in self-reflection is both to model it and to engage them in the process as students.
I assert that social work educators must teach students to be reflective of their work within the classroom and then in practice. Therefore, it is essential that social work educators reflect on their teaching within the classroom. Alderton (2008), a mathematics teacher, asserted that teachers must think critically about what happens in the classroom. He noted that reflection and self-study enable teachers to become more aware of what happens in the classroom, how this impacts the teachers’ pedagogy, and allows teachers to become better at their profession. He observed that the more aware a teacher is about him- or herself, the more equipped the teacher is in the classroom.

Social workers also have known about the importance of reflection within the practice and about self-reflection. The literature reviewed noted that several faculty members who have used the bottleneck model with success have used reflection as part of the process. When students learn about the importance of reflection within the classroom, they are more likely to use the skill in practice. One could argue that the Decoding the Disciplines Model encompasses each of the above-mentioned theories and could help students to become more prepared social workers for the real world.

**Literature Review**

While there is limited information about the use of the Decoding the Disciplines Model, those who have utilized the model have seen improvements within the classroom. Professors from several different disciplines have utilized the model. The following is a summary of published articles about using the bottleneck model within higher education.

Durisen and Pilachowski (2004) discovered that students had a bottleneck when they were learning about the solar system. They used the Decoding the Disciplines Model to “help students visualize astronomical concepts” (p. 33). Pilachowski noted that even though textbooks
offered photos and maps of the concepts, students were not able to actually visualize them on their own. Durisen and Pilachowski used balls of differing sizes and colors to enable students to visualize the reality of the solar system. The authors offered an example of an assignment which was piloted with students. They had students develop a children’s book about different concepts, breaking the difficult concepts down into easily understandable notions. Next, Pilachowski had students sketch the concepts and then they reflected on the process. After evaluating the process, the researchers discovered students had an enhanced understanding of the concepts. One exciting aspect of the bottleneck model is that it can be used across all disciplines.

Miller-Young and Boman (2017) collected bottlenecks from different disciplines and conducted an inductive content analysis of the compiled works. The researchers conducted interviews with faculty members who had teaching experience from 10-30 years. As similar themes emerged, they decided to formally code the interviews. The following themes emerged: “ways of thinking (i.e., deconstructing and reconstructing information and recognizing patterns), ways of practicing (i.e., valuing provisionally, expanding thinking, attending to the world, and taking agency), and ways of being (i.e., being ethical and authentic)” (Miller-Young & Boman, 2017, p. 22). The researchers found that one strength of the Decoding the Disciplines Model is a connection with faculty and practitioners. This strength is one of the defining factors of good social work education. When practitioners and faculty come together to inform social work students, students are better informed and prepared for practice in the field.

Ardizzone, Breithaupt, and Gutjahr (2004) completed a study of literature courses using the seven steps of the Decoding the Disciplines Model. The researchers developed the following questions: “How do we encourage learners to go beyond the obvious literal meaning of literary texts?” and “How do we help learners sense that not all products of speculation are equally
valid?” (2004, p. 45). These two bottlenecks in learning impacted student learning for all three professors in their respective courses. Together, they implemented a metaphor that the students were writing the works themselves. Using “minute papers” (a popular Classroom Assessment Technique), students then reflected on learning. They used two other techniques to help students. Reflection is present in most uses of the Decoding the Disciplines Model where significant changes occur. I contend that reflection strengthens this model as well as teaching in general. When a professor takes the time to reflect on what occurred, he or she is being more conscious about teaching and learning.

While many teachers seem to be having success with the Decoding the Disciplines Model, only limited numbers of them are conducting research beyond CATs. It is essential that more data collection occurs (Durisen & Pilachowski, 2004). Once research is collected, analyzed, and evaluated, the results can be shared through publications and conferences.

Discussion and Future Research

As previously mentioned, there is little research on the Decoding the Disciplines Model. This should not be indicative of the potential successes the model can produce. One might ask why this model has not been utilized by more faculty. This may be because use of the model requires faculty to take time to think through the process and use much critical analysis and creativity to guide students through the bottleneck. While some new teaching models have fewer steps and are less cumbersome, social work education would be strengthened with the use of the Decoding the Disciplines Model. Now that social work education is using a competency-based model, the use of the bottleneck model would greatly benefit social work educators and students. Students must show their behaviors and learning the bottleneck model requires that students can accomplish this. The model also allows for students to work in interdisciplinary teams so that all
students are working on their professional standards, in different ways, to accomplish the same goals. For example, when a high school student athlete is rushed to the emergency room many professionals have different roles to accomplish proper and appropriate patient care. Doctors decide on texts and medical treatments, nurses watch for vital signs, technicians attend to orders from doctors, and social workers work with parents to calm and answer questions. The Decoding the Disciplines Model can assist a struggle in any one of these areas.

As faculty members uncover the mental tasks needed to help students move past a bottleneck, they must think about knowledge, skills, and values they may not have had to think about in years. As social workers are in practice, they begin to develop a particular way of accomplishing certain tasks needed. For example, Department of Social Service workers try to help parents who have lost custody of their children with the goal of reunification (except in extreme cases). The knowledge they utilize is the understanding of the importance of Attachment Theory and they understand the research which states that most children want to return to their biological parents. The social workers must use the skills of modeling appropriate communication and problem-solving. They also use the values of objectivity, never victim-blaming, and remaining impartial with all parties involved. This may seem like too much for a social work student, but as one moves from student to professional, she or he is able to accomplish these tasks with ease. They almost become second nature. The way a professor uses the Decoding the Disciplines Model is to understand first what tasks are needed then develop a way to teach students to understand these tasks.

As mentioned, some professionals have gathered common bottlenecks within their professional curriculum. I hope to do a similar study in the future with social work professors. It would be interesting to note what social work students versus social work faculty see as
bottlenecks. There is much room within the profession of social work to conduct research on bottleneck pedagogy. Once the student bottlenecks are discovered, I hope to help professors develop strategies to allow students to overcome their bottlenecks. This could help students in the classroom and also in field practice. While the process may seem arduous, the rewards and student outcomes are identifiable, tangible, and measurable.
HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME BOTTLENECKS

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Using a Self-Study to Become a More Informed Educator

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Abstract

After 17 years of teaching, I decided to complete a self-study in my social work diversity course related to an innovative teaching method. There is little in the literature about using self-studies in social work courses and noting related to the Decoding the Disciplines Model. I completed a qualitative self-study and found my students could understand implicit biases much earlier. I plan to implement a similar study in other courses where I use the model. The following is a scholarly personal narrative of my work.
Using a Self-Study to Become a More Informed Educator

My parents were both teachers and education has always been a part of my life. The greatest lessons I learned in life came from mom and dad. In 2000, when I told my dad I was going to teach social work, he encouraged me to always work hard to become a better teacher. I made a promise to myself (and my future students) that I would never let myself become comfortable in social work education. I have pushed myself to stay abreast of new teaching methods and refining my own ontological approach. Working on my DSW has given me the tools to keep my promise to my father and myself. After learning about the process of a self-study, I knew it was time for me to become vulnerable and critically examine my teaching.

Self-study is a process of scholarship which originated in the field of education by which a teacher uses critical analysis and scrutiny to examine his or her teaching. According to Berry (2008), self-study enables a teacher to better understand teaching by understanding learning and thinking. Berry (2008) explained that when a teacher utilizes self-study, he or she begins to understand his or her own pedagogy and the connection to worldview and pedagogy and how this relates to education. One of the most innovative additions to my teaching toolkit has been the use of the Decoding the Disciplines Model.

Pace and Middendorf (2004) developed an innovative way of helping teachers to help students when they become stuck on a particular topic. The word bottleneck has been used and applied to multiple disciplines from math to psychology. In most areas, a bottleneck is used to describe a phenomenon that occurs when there is a halt to learning or understanding. Pace and Middendorf (2004) developed a model that teachers can utilize when students become stuck or hindered in their thinking, which they call a bottleneck. By using the model, teachers can develop a way to enable students to move past the bottleneck and continue to think and learn.
A bottleneck is a topic or idea that students have difficulty understanding. For example, many policy students find it difficult to make the connection between policy and the time period when policy was created or changed. Pace and Middendorf (2004) would encourage faculty to use their Decoding the Disciplines Model to help students make this critical connection. Their bottleneck model involves a seven-step process which faculty can use in classes. The goal of the seven steps is to help faculty correctly identify which concept is confusing for students, identify how practitioners address similar problems in practice, and to enable faculty to create innovative methods to teach students so they overcome the bottleneck. The specific steps include:

1. Discovering the bottleneck in the classroom,
2. Discovering how experts in the field would address the issue,
3. Determining which intellectual skills must be taught,
4. Having the students practice the skills,
5. Learning what will motivate students,
6. Measuring the students’ ability to master skills,
7. Sharing knowledge with the field.

While this model has been utilized by several other curriculum areas, there is no literature published on its use in social work education.

So, it is with a full heart, curiosity, and trepidation that I decided to conduct a Self-study of my utilization of the bottleneck model in my undergraduate diversity class. I wanted to discover

1. What is the most effective way to help students learn they all bring preconceived notions and stereotypes to the table?
2. How can I best encourage students to identify and be willing to admit preconceived notions to become more culturally aware and competent?
3. What is a creative way that I can use the Bottleneck Model to help students become aware of and more culturally sensitive to the above questions?
I think my father would be proud. For these reasons, I spent spring of 2018 collecting data to complete the following self-study.

**Review of Literature**

**Bottleneck Model**

Durisen and Pilachowski (2004) discovered that students had a bottleneck when they were learning about the solar system. They used the bottleneck model to “help students visualize astronomical concepts” (p. 33). Pilachowski noted that even though textbooks offered photos and maps of the concepts that students were not able to actually visualize them on their own. Durisen and Pilachowski used balls of differing sizes and colors to enable students to visualize the reality of the solar system. The authors offered an example of an assignment which was piloted with students. They had students develop a children’s book about different concepts, breaking the difficult concepts down into easily understandable notions, which are projects helpful to all types of learners. Next, Pilachowski had students sketch the concepts and then they reflected on the process. After evaluating the process, the researchers discovered students had an enhanced understanding of the concepts. One exciting aspect of the Decoding the Disciplines Model is that it can be used across all disciplines.

While many teachers seem to be having success with the bottleneck model, only limited numbers of them are conducting research beyond Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs). It is essential that more data collection occurs (Durisen & Pilachowski, 2004). Once data are collected, analyzed, and evaluated, the results can be shared through publications and conferences. While Durisen and Pilachowski made a good point that more sound research methods need to be used when utilizing the model, I decided to take two steps before this. First, I wrote a conceptual framework paper, in which I made my case for why the model should be
used in social work education. Here, I am exploring how the model has influenced my teaching. My next steps are to use CATs and other assessments to show if the model has an impact on student learning.

Miller-Young and Boman (2017) collected bottlenecks (e.g., areas in their discipline where students often become stuck) from different disciplines and conducted an inductive content analysis of the compiled works. The researchers conducted interviews with faculty members who had teaching experience ranging from 10-30 years. As similar themes emerged, they decided to formally code the interviews. The following themes emerged: “ways of thinking (i.e., deconstructing and reconstructing information and recognizing patterns), ways of practicing (i.e., valuing provisionality, expanding thinking, attending to the world, and taking agency), and ways of being (i.e., being ethical and authentic)” (Miller-Young & Boman, 2017, p. 22). The researchers found that one strength of the Decoding the Disciplines Model is a connection between faculty and practitioners. I believe this is one of the defining factors of good social work education. When practitioners and faculty come together to inform social work students, students are better informed and prepared for practice in the field and beyond. I hope to conduct a similar study in the future with social work professors. It would be interesting to note what social work students versus social work faculty see as bottlenecks. There is much room within the profession of social work to conduct research on bottleneck pedagogy.

Ardizzone, Breithaupt, and Gutjahr (2004) completed a study of literature courses using the seven steps of the Decoding the Disciplines Model. The researchers developed the following questions: “How do we encourage learners to go beyond the obvious literal meaning of literary texts?” and “How do we help learners sense that not all products of speculation are equally valid?” (p. 45). These two bottlenecks in learning impacted student learning for all three
professors in their respective courses. Together, they implemented a metaphor that the students were writing the works themselves. Using “minute papers” (a popular Classroom Assessment Technique [CAT]), students then reflected on learning. Reflection is present in most uses of the Decoding the Disciplines Model where significant changes occur. I contend that reflection strengthens this model as well as teaching in general. When a professor takes the time to reflect on what occurred, he or she is being more conscious of teaching and learning. I believe Self-Reflection has the most potential for beginning steps. Then the reflection can be broadened to a Self-Study.

**Self-Reflection and Social Work Education**

While some professors today may see self-reflection as a softer and less important way of addressing and assessing one’s teaching, Dewey saw reflection as a living and working mechanism based on the scientific method to help educators think critically about their work. His model was a cognitive six-step model to address discussion and problem-solving. Dewey was considered by many to be one of the greatest philosophers and educators of his time.

Dewey’s work was influenced by several aspects. First, the scientific model began to ask for a consistent process to explain hypotheses and information. This had a huge impact on his work. Dewey’s work was the first of its kind that asked educators to be more thoughtful, reflective, and what we might call today mindful about what and how educators present new material to students. Dewey was also a noted philosopher and educator. His experiences within the classroom (from 1884-1930) and in speeches informed his work and influenced his theory. He experienced education, which informed his work with students and led to his numerous models of teaching. Dewey was also a prolific writer who produced over 1,000 works, most of which were examples of mistakes that occur in the classroom and suggestions for correcting
them. He passion for education was a guiding force for his work. His work was also influenced by psychologist William James. Both wrote on the interplay between experiences in life and how these experiences impact both learners and teachers. It is evident that Dewey was a life-long learner who cared greatly about the profession of education (Jordan, 2015).

**Bottleneck Problems to Self-Reflection to Self-Assessment**

In 1951, Hollis and Taylor noted how social work education has had a long struggle with helping students “make this critical connection” (p. 238). In their seminal paper, Hollis and Taylor suggested that another step in social work curriculum changes would require social work educators to come to grips with the issues and problems inherent in organizing agreed-upon concepts into manageable teaching units and courses, and in selecting curriculum experiences to give flesh-and-blood reality and the breath of life to what would otherwise be an intellectual valley of dry bones. The current basic curriculum has been criticized as having what is believed to be an unsound dichotomy between classroom and field instruction. (Hollis and Taylor, 1951)

To address and ameliorate difficult issues in social work education, we must first correctly understand the actual issues. This is the first step of the Bottleneck Model. Once we fully understand the problem, we as educators can look to innovative and creative ways of overcoming them.

I believe, after reflecting upon the bottleneck, a clear way to gather data related to how to improve education is to take a difficult and timely look at how we are presenting the materials. I believe this is where the self-study of one’s teaching is crucial to complete the process. While self-studies have predominantly been used in the field of education, there are a few social work educators who are promoting the methodology.
The process of my self-study was not always easy and often I felt as if I was swimming upstream. However, it was one of the most significant experiences in my 18 years of teaching social work. The methodology will be illuminated in the next section.

**Methodology**

The aim of my qualitative approach was to discover answers to the following questions:

1. What is the most effective way to help students learn they all bring preconceived notions and stereotypes to the table?

2. How can I best encourage students to identify and be willing to admit preconceived notions in order to become more culturally aware and competent?

3. What is a creative way that I can use the Bottleneck Model to help students become aware of and more culturally sensitive to the above questions?

After examining the different approaches to qualitative research, the self-study approach was what I concluded would be best for me. My ultimate dream is to use the Decoding the Disciplines Model to help other faculty members move students past difficult concepts and processes. While a self-study is cumbersome and often an incredible amount of work, it gave me insights about my teaching and student learning that are invaluable.

**Course Chosen for Self-Study**

I completed the self-study in my SOCW 402 Diversity in Contemporary Society class during Spring 2018. It was a traditional in-person class that met two times a week for one hour and fifteen minutes. I chose this class because it typically has about half social work majors and half students taking the course as an upper-level perspectives course for liberal studies.

Out of 40 students, 24 were social work majors and there was a wide array of diversity among students. There was no IRB completed for this self-study, as I wanted to begin by
delving into my teaching and different ways to improve upon my ability to help students understand their preconceived notions. Because I was only examining my work as a teacher, there was no need to worry about protection of human participants; only my ego could be at risk. I have taught this particular course each semester for the past six years and always noticed that it would take students until two thirds of the way into the semester to begin to open up about their feelings of white guilt, white privilege, and oppression. Instinctively, I knew this was too late into the semester for students to have these AHA moments.

**Intentional Changes in the Course During the Self Study**

After understanding the bottleneck issue was that students were coming to conclusions about their own issues far too late into the semester (step 1), I spent much of my Christmas break learning what experts do to help clients understand these concepts (step 2). I learned that many of the leaders in the field of diversity approach these issues much earlier in the semester than I had in the past. This helped me to redesign my course for the Spring semester.

I also decided to answer four questions after each class. The questions were:

1. What did I do in class?
2. Why did I do it?
3. Was it successful or not?
4. What changes or improvements could be made for next time?

These questions kept me on target and forced me to evaluate what occurred in each class setting and the success or need for more work related to the class.

The way I used the Decoding the Disciplines Model in this class was to begin with two photos (step 3). In the model, educators are asked to develop a creative way to help students move past their point where they become stuck. I began the first week showing students two
photos. The first photo was focused on a droplet of water on a single blade of grass. I discussed how the grass could have been from the quad in front of the school fountain. We discussed what a person notices when he or she is so focused on only one aspect. Students made great observations about social work theories, which tend to be very limited in scope.

![Figure 1. Photo Number 1 (Blade of Grass).](image1)

Next, I showed the students the second photo of the campus filled with students participating in International Day. I asked what they would say this time and they noted the energy, colors, and activities. They connected the photo to theories including the Ecological Perspective, Person-In-Environment and Systems Theory. They began to see the invisible connections among students and the activities of the event.

![Figure 2. Photo Number 2 (Scenery with Grass).](image2)
I encouraged students to consider using a new lens when moving through the course readings, materials, discussions, and content. I asked them to move back and forth deciding which photo represented how they felt about particular issues of diversity. Were they used to looking at one aspect of an issue or were they perhaps overwhelmed by numerous ideas? I asked them to acquire an old-fashioned camera (i.e., one with a wide lens). They, of course, laughed and asked if they could use their cell phones but I encouraged them to find a larger one (noting they could be rented from the university).

I asked them to take the camera with them as much as they could, within reason, during the semester. I asked them to explore with the camera lens to see how a difference in lens strength could completely change a photo. I asked them to take photos that represented diversity to them. By allowing them to define diversity, I gave them practice with feedback (step 4). Each week, different students would show the photos they had captured over their time. We saw everything from drag show photos, to nonaccessible ramps for wheelchairs, chalking from Black Lives Matters events, and much more. Students became excited as other classmates and I noted the power in photos (step 5). By the end of the semester, students had to tell their story about their growth in diversity through photos and a narrative to demonstrate mastery (or not) in the course (step 6). I gave students the option to keep their stories private, but they wanted to share them with the class, so we had a show-and-tell session the last week of class.

Data Collection and Analysis

I kept a weekly journal of what occurred within each class and then took my four-question quiz. In retrospect, it would have been helpful if I had typed this information; however, keeping a journal with me each week was easier because I always had access to it. The analysis of the data really didn’t come together until the completion of the course. It was interesting for
me to see what had occurred in individual classes both on camera and in student reflections. What had occurred in individual classes both on camera and in student reflections was interesting for me. However, it was the culmination of all research gathered, at the end of the semester, where I could see growth in my pedagogy and also my confidence with the materials and my presentation style.

**Strengths and Limitations**

One strength of this study was the nature of the self-study. Rather than focusing on what students learned, I could focus on how I was delivering materials and what impact the changes I implemented had. While this is a strength, it is also a limitation. When I replicate this in the future, I will be adding a pre- and posttests for students to examine their confidence in the model and in themselves. Also, some students found it difficult to carry such a large camera with them during the semester, but most noted it was worth the effort in the end. While the self-study is also a cumbersome and tedious process, the results obtained are well worth the work.

**Results**

While I kept notes from each class, I wrote up the results in biweekly segments. The results from this self-study have helped me to become more confident in diversity and also have shown me that the Decoding the Disciplines Model can be most beneficial for social work classes. I provide the findings for each of my three original research questions below. Through this self-study, I learned that using the bottleneck model and the camera as a metaphor for a students’ own lens have been most effective for me in helping students learn that they all bring preconceived notions and stereotypes to the table.
The Most Effective Way to Help Students Learn They All Have Preconceived Notions and Stereotypes

In past classes, I have tried to help students understand that we all bring unconscious bias with us to classes. This was not always easy because students often noted they had already dealt with any issues they may have had in the past. I tried to explain that this is an ongoing process that we must continue to check. For years, I struggled with this. I would almost always have students in my office near the end of the semester telling me they had discovered they had not been honest with themselves and feeling like they were not good enough for social work due to these issues. It has taken me many years and much prep work to help students move around this bottleneck in their diversity education.

By spending time looking at prior classes and correctly defining the problem, I could complete the first step of the bottleneck process (step 1). I always wondered if the problem was that I, a white, middle-class woman, was teaching diversity. I could see how this notion could be unsettling to students from minority groups. Although my evaluations have not mentioned this comment, it is still present in my thoughts. After discovering that the most pervasive problem is helping students to understand their own biases, I could conduct a literature review and syllabus search to see how other BSW programs are teaching diversity (step 2).

I was happy to see that several of the readings, assignments, and discussions were similar to what I was already doing in with students. What surprised me was how early in the semester other educators were discussing privilege and especially white privilege. After some time to reflect, I knew it was simply that I had assumed that students from the deep south, where my university is, were not ready to have such a profound discussion early in the semester. In all honesty, I probably was worried too. I decided to completely change my syllabus for the semester.
How I Can Best Encourage Students to Identify and Admit Preconceived Notions to Become More Culturally Aware and Competent

**Weeks 1 and 2.**

Readings: White Privilege: Unpacking the … (176), Debunking the Pathology of Poverty (78), How Does It Feel to be a Problem? (237), and Self-Fulfilling Stereotypes (541)

Discussions: The Big 8 (gender, economic status, ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, race, and religion).

Out of Class: Students were asked to find a camera or check out one from the university.

**Reflection:** This was not that different from what I have done in the past with students. The major difference was asking them to obtain a camera and explaining that I wanted them to use the camera over the semester to document both diversity and oppression.

**Weeks 3 and 4.**

Readings: Intersectionality: An Everyday Metaphor…(171), Constructing Race, Creating White Privilege (21) , and “Night to His Day”: The Social Construction of Gender (38)

Video/Discussion: We watched *The Intouchables* in class and students worked in small groups to determine which of the Big 8 was most crucial to the video.

**Reflection:** As always, students reported loving this video. They were able to successfully identify all 8 of the Big 8’s of diversity within the video. Most of the class decided ability versus disability was the most prominent of the Big 8, while others decided it was socioeconomic status.
Weeks 5 and 6.

Readings: Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race…(163), Impossible Subjects: Illegal…(207), Deportations are Down…(266), Where “English Only” Falls Short (285), For Asian Americans, Wealth…(361), Civilize them with a Stick (407), Crossing the Border…(419), Still Separate, Still Unequal (570), and You May Know Me From…(589)

Discussions: White Privilege and other forms of privilege, where our biases come from and Social Constructivism

In-Class Activity: Students completed the privilege walk (for self) and also stand up/sit down (related to their hometown) and they took two Implicit Bias quizzes

Reflection: This was my first AHA moment with students. I was shocked to hear students openly admit they not only have seen privilege on campus but have ignored it. I am used to hearing this at the end of the course from students. They could connect with social constructs and how they limit people. Several students openly admitted that they have racist and homophobic relatives. Students from minority groups shared stories about how they have been ignored, oppressed, and even discriminated against. It was one of those discussions that a teacher wishes could last forever. The strange thing was that I did not have to ask many questions or prompt students. They were ready to discuss the readings, video, and content. It was a beautiful class with honesty, genuineness, and tears.

Weeks 7 and 8.

Readings: Oppression (130), The Motivating Forces Behind Black Lives…(639), Domination and Subordination (91), Defining Racism: Can We Talk? (105),
Helping Students Overcome Bottlenecks

Color-Blind Racism (113), Class in America (144), The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration…(258) and Pollution, Poverty, and People of Color (316)

Discussions: Intersectionality and power and oppression

In-Class Activity: The Power Shuffle

Reflection: After the power shuffle, students were very quiet. It was as if the air had been sucked from the room. Students returned to their seats and I could see the pain in the eyes of some. One student asked the first question (which was a winner): How can we ever stop all of this discrimination, violence, and hatred? I thought about discussing policy changes, education, and other things but listened to my inner voice and had them break up into groups to discuss her question. Thank goodness, I did. Their responses were passionate, poised, and persuasive. That afternoon the tears were all mine.

Weeks 9 and 10.

Readings: Transgender Feminism…(71), Women in the State Police…(290), Gender and the Black Job Crisis (364), Domestic Workers Bill of Rights (373), My Vassar College Faculty ID Makes Everything…(453), and Feminism: A Transformational Politic (616)

Discussions: Gender and Power, Defining Feminism, Should we Strive for a Gender-Neutral Society?

In-Class Activity: Has the #metoo Movement helped or hurt gender in the US?

Reflection: Students were quick to note that many women fell into several minority status categories. Luckily, I had my research about what women of color make versus Caucasian women. Students reported feeling torn about the #metoo Movement. While they all agreed that
it was positive that women and men were able to speak more freely about sexual abuse and exploitation, several noted that only one false accusation was harmful to everyone.

**Weeks 11 and 12.**

Readings: My Class Didn’t Trump My Race (181), The Myth of the Model Minority, (230), The Problem: Discrimination (247), My Black Skin Makes My White Coat…(288), Race, and Family Income of Students…(307), More Blacks Live with Pollution (313), and Masked Racism: Reflections of the Prison…(584)

Video/Discussions: We watched The 13th together and discussed the video

In-Class Activity: Who well do we know our history exercise?

**Reflection:** I have decided I will always show The 13th in diversity class. Students were stunned by the lack of accuracy in the history they learned and sickened by the correctional and penal systems in the United States. They were able to pull concepts from previous classes into the discussion. They pulled from readings about how this has created another Jim Crow era. Several students felt safe enough to share stories about family and friends who had been or were still incarcerated. I could almost feel the amount of empathy in the room.

**A Creative Way I Can Use the Bottleneck Model to Help Students Become Aware of and More Culturally Sensitive to the Above Questions**

I decided to try the camera project to see if it was an effective way for students to understand their own biases and preconceived notions. I was blown away by the visual representations students shared the last week and a half of class. I had told students they could decide to share or not. Almost everyone shared and they had gone so far above and beyond what I had expected. Several students made PowerPoint or Prezi presentations, others made collages, and one student made a scrapbook of her semester in diversity. They all had so many photos, some positive like the Whee March (a march social work faculty held to show students
discrimination on campus should not be tolerated), and some negative, like chalking on the sidewalks, which were homophobic. Students reported their lens had changed mostly because they were more aware of their surroundings. Some students reported that they actually stopped to talk to strangers when they heard comments that belittled others. Other students reported discussions they had with their parents about issues like interracial dating and coming out. I felt more than blessed to have learned from such creative and intelligent students.

Discussion

Potential Implications for Teaching

One of the reasons the self-study was successful, in my opinion, was because after each class I recorded my answers to the following questions:

1. What did I do in class?
2. Why did I do it?
3. Was it successful, or not?
4. What changes or improvements could be made for next time?

First, knowing I would be recording this information was helpful because I found myself preparing for class in a more systematic way. Also, because I had completed my outline before the beginning of the semester, which included activities, readings, videos, and discussion topics, I had a stronger pool of resources to pull from for each class section. In the past, I have made two mistakes in various classes. I have overprepared with too many PowerPoint slides, video clips, and so forth that I ended up rushing through important information without offering students the opportunity to ask questions and get clarification. I have also underprepared for classes. I have taken in a list of discussion questions which I thought would stimulate discussion for the entire period that didn’t last long enough. By having these four questions, I could find
more resources than I needed for class but still offer time for rich discussion and critical analysis of personal student stories. I started recording my answers to the same questions in another class that I was teaching that semester. For both classes, I found it so valuable to consider why an activity worked or didn’t. I recorded many notes from the diversity class that have greatly strengthened my teaching of the course this semester. For example, I learned that the students didn’t really understand the concept of intersectionality when I taught it while completing the self-study. This semester I had students watch a YouTube video on the topic before the class and they reported a much deeper understanding of the concept and how it connects to social work practice.

I also learned, through this process, that I will continue to use the Decoding the Disciplines Model in classes when I find areas in which students become stuck. I am using the camera as a metaphor for a student’s own lens again this semester, and the lessons learned from my self-study, and feel more confident and competent as an educator than I have in quite some time. I have drunk the bottleneck Kool-Aid! To say I am a fan is a gross understatement. I am using the bottleneck model this semester in a children and families course to help students overcome negative feelings when working with parents who physically and sexually abuse their children. A paper will be forthcoming on the results from this course.

Connection to Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, there is very limited literature on the outcomes of the Decoding the Disciplines Model. Most of the professors who have utilized this model are in the humanities and teaching liberal studies courses. I would like to fill in some of the gaps in the literature. I would also like to see more competency-based curricula use the model.
Strengths and Limitations

I found two strengths with my work on this project. First, the use of self-study is applicable and helpful to any educator wanting to take a critical and sometimes painful look at his or her work within the classroom. The process was long, but more than worth the effort. I learned that my critical ontological model is a perfect fit for a self-study but that it would be helpful to all types of thinkers and learners. I also learned that the bottleneck model can work in competency-based social work education. I have now suggested the model to nursing and athletic training professors.

The limitations are obvious. First, it is always difficult to tell what made one section of a course better than another one. There are so many variables which can be difficult to parse out. I am confident, however, that the combination of the self-study and the bottleneck model have improved my teaching in the diversity course.

Future Steps

It is my intention to complete a few more self-studies of my own teaching using the Decoding the Disciplines Model. Then I intend to complete some pre- and posttests with students using the model to see their ideas are about the usefulness of the model. I also intend to complete a national search of social work educators to see what they find to be particular bottlenecks they see with students in courses. Once I have this information, I will be able to work on helping others and myself develop solutions for said bottlenecks. My goal is to be able to have educators call me with bottlenecks they have identified and to be able to walk them through the process and help them find ways to enable students to overcome the bottleneck. I intend to further the scholarship surrounding both the areas of self-study in social work and the bottleneck model in social work education.
References


Appendix

Decoding the Disciplines Wheel

1. Define a bottleneck
2. Uncover the mental task
3. Model tasks
4. Give practice and feedback
5. Motivate and lessen resistance
6. Assess student mastery
7. Share
#iamstucknomore Enhancing Student Learning and Application Using the Decoding the Disciplines Model

Jeanne Goins Dulworth

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Abstract
This presentation focuses on using the Decoding the Disciplines Model (Middendorf, 2004) to enable students to overcome those challenging moments where they typically get “stuck” in their learning process. Participants learned how to help students move past the bottleneck when learning difficult concepts and skills. Participants completing this workshop were able to successfully (a) apply the seven steps of the Decoding the Disciplines Model to areas within the classroom where students become unable to move past difficult concepts, (b) engage students in the Decoding the Disciplines Model process while motivating them to move past the bottleneck, and (c) understand how to use self-study and Classroom Assessment Techniques with the Model to enhance the process of teaching and learning.

Key Words: Bottlenecks, Decoding the Disciplines Model, Higher Education, Social Work Education, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
Presentation of Content

The following information was presented at The Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors 36th Annual Conference in Jacksonville, FL on March 15, 2019. The presentation, #iamstucknomore Enhancing Student Learning and Application Using the Bottleneck Model, was a presentation workshop that lasted for one hour and fifteen minutes. The presentation was a combination of work from both the author’s conceptual framework (Product #1) and her scholarly personal narrative of her Self-Study (Product #2).

The presentation focused on what faculty can do when students become stuck in their thinking. In psychology, this is known as a bottleneck. The presentation began with the work of Pace and Middendorf (2004), who developed a seven-step model to help students move past the bottleneck. Participants were shown how the Decoding the Disciplines Model was used to help students in an undergraduate diversity course to overcome the bottleneck of not being able to admit to preconceived notions or implicit bias that they bring to the class. I also provided two other demonstrations where the model has worked: with nursing students who were unable to face a client with a puss-infested oozing wound and with social work policy students who did not understand the importance of understanding history related to when and how policies are developed and implemented.

Finally, participants were given a new model, expanded from the Decoding the Disciplines Model, which demonstrates the need for reflection in the process. A semester-long self-study was discussed using the expanded model.
#IAMSTUCKNOMORE
ENHANCING STUDENT LEARNING AND APPLICATION USING THE BOTTLENECK MODEL

Jeanne Dulworth, MSW, DSW Candidate
Professor of Social Work, WCU

I HAVE MISSED BPD!

Please tweet or email me about my presentation. I need quotes for my dissertation. Or pass me a note at the end of class!
Workshop Objectives

1. Apply the seven steps of the Bottleneck Model where students become unable to move past difficult concepts.

2. Motivate and engage students in the Bottleneck process.

3. Understand how to use self-reflection and Self-Assessment to enhance the process of teaching and learning within the social work curriculum.

What is a Bottleneck?

- Pace and Middendorf have worked to help students to overcome those challenging moments where they typically get “stuck” in their learning process (Pace & Middendorf, 2004)

- When students can’t move past a concept or application
  - Policy Class-History
  - Diversity Class-I don’t have biases
  - Nursing Class-Oozing puss-filled wound
HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME BOTTLENECKS

Decoding the Disciplines Wheel

1. Define a bottleneck
2. Uncover the mental task
3. Model tasks
4. Give practice and feedback
5. Motivate and lessen resistance
6. Assess student mastery
7. Share

Dulworth’s Conceptual Framework

Reflection

Self-Study

Informed Teaching
Why I Developed this Framework

- New area of study
- Love of SoTL
- Health Educators Academy Work (Joan Middendorf)
- Reflection noted in literature
- Curiosity of Self-Study

Methodology

- Exploratory
- Unknown, Unknown
- Qualitative Self-Study
- My Contribution to SoTL and social work education
- My dedication to Dad
Research Questions

- Can the Model improve SW education?
- What impact does reflection have on the process and student learning?

Hypotheses

- The Model can improve SW education
- Reflection is necessary to fully inform the teacher
Study Setting

- WCU
- Diversity in Contemporary Society
- \( \frac{1}{2} \) Social Work Students and \( \frac{1}{2} \) others
- ULP
- In past, students unable to admit to biases

Decoding the Disciplines Wheel

1. Define a bottleneck
2. Uncover the mental task
3. Model tasks
4. Give practice and feedback
5. Motivate and lessen resistance
6. Assess student mastery
7. Share
HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME BOTTLENECKS

- Consider using a new lens when moving through course
- Back and forth when considering diversity issues
- Get an old-fashioned camera with strong lens
- Take the camera with them as much as they could during the semester
- Explore with the camera lens to see how a difference in lens strength could completely change a photo
- Take photos which represented diversity to them
- Diversity Photo Storybook Project

Self Study

- Much work was implemented before class ever began
- Answered questions after each class
  1. What did I do in class?
  2. Why did I do it?
  3. Was it successful or not?
  4. What changes or improvements could be made for next time?
- *Type answers to questions
- Taped my classes
- At the end I had a rich resource of what had actually occurred during the semester.

Maybe if she didn't look at the paperwork, it would just go away.
Results

- 3 weeks students understood implicit bias
- Students became more engaged
- More informed teaching
- Photo stories were rich and rewarding
  - Drag show photos
  - Non-accessible ramps for wheelchairs
  - Chalking from Black Lives Matters events

Implications

- Bottleneck model can help us help students become unstuck!
- Must find exact bottleneck
- Must be willing to be vulnerable
Activity

What is a bottleneck that you have seen with students?

Activity Part 2

What could you do to help them overcome the bottleneck?
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References

References


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doi:10.1002/tl.142