

Integrative Learning and Development of Professional Portfolios

The MSW Student Experience

University of Michigan’s School of Social Work has been committed to a social justice-oriented curricular and professional development effort that includes the infusion of integrative and portfolio-based learning methods and practices. The intent of this initiative was to provide students with regular opportunities to be reflective, generative, and integrative in their learning processes, to surface and strengthen their knowledge, skills, and values, and to develop portfolios that communicate these new insights.

Overview

The School of Social Work (SSW) has been involved in enhancing integrative learning opportunities within the Masters of Social Work (MSW) curriculum since 2001 and in electronic portfolio development since 2004.

These efforts are important to our work in educating social workers to be leaders, innovators, and social change agents. In this initiative, students engage in a process to meet the following learning objectives:

- Surface and articulate tacit knowledge and skills, as well as personal and professional values
- Generate new knowledge, including a professional identity and future goals
- Integrate academic coursework, field experiences, and personal growth
- Link new knowledge and goals to a personal vision of social justice
- Organize, document and communicate information in a publicly accessible format
- Reflect and actively evaluate knowledge, skills, values and goals iteratively

“The portfolio process allowed me the chance to reflect upon what is important to me and the reasons behind my beliefs and practice.”

What is integrative learning?

Integrative learning is the process of making meaningful connections across disparate contexts. In the context of social work education, students are encouraged to integrate the knowledge developed in coursework, fieldwork, and beyond in order to fully articulate their skills, values, and goals for future professional practice.

How is integrative learning currently infused into the curriculum?

- Elective 1-credit capstone seminar for students to create portfolio
- Some faculty and field instructors have adopted assignments that ask students to articulate their knowledge and skills across context.
- The educational learning agreement for field internships has been modified to incorporate integrative learning tasks and more reflective assignments.

“I have a mission now – not just to learn and earn my degree – but to create and synthesize workable products.”

What is a portfolio?

An e-portfolio, or electronic portfolio, is a collection of documents that communicates one’s knowledge, skills, and evidence of learning to a public audience in a digital format.

What is the portfolio process?

Portfolio-based learning promotes an integrative, facilitative, and evaluative process that helps students:

- identify sources of inspiration and insight
- clarify personal values and professional goals
- participate in dialogue and feedback sessions with others, including peers, faculty, and field staff
- engage in praxis, which is a process of integrating critical knowledge, with action, reflection, and the capacity to demonstrate their learning.

“I think this is going to be an invaluable tool for me in the field, as a means of presenting my professional self to potential employers and contemplating my practice in the field.”

Linking the portfolio initiative to social justice goals

The initiative aimed to address social justice competencies and socially just practice, and surfaced the following issues:

- Participants have valuable tacit and explicit knowledge that has not previously been articulated or even recognized
- Curricular gaps exist between classroom, co-curricular, and field-based learning;
- Students need support, healing and (re)generation while completing their program;
- Socially just practice relies on praxis – iterative process between theory and action
- Mentoring (by faculty, field instructors, peers) is a critical component of learning
- The School of Social Work has not previously provided students with support for systemic integration of learning
- Social justice work requires active reflection and a well-developed sense of one’s intersectional multi-dimensional selves and social locations

Process and Product

The process guides students through a process of addressing the following:

- What do I know? What have I accomplished? What skills do I now have because of work I have done?
- So what does this mean? What are my values and beliefs? What motivates me? What guides me?
- Now what does this mean for my future choices? My current goals?

Key Learning Experiences



Students choose key learning experiences and provide detailed assessments of the knowledge, skills and lessons they gained in the process. Students:

- describe the tasks accomplished, skills gained, lessons learned, and impact on their future goals
- articulate the connection between these key experiences and their core beliefs and values
- add concrete artifacts of learning (academic assignments, work-related products, and other types of documentation) that illustrate these connections

Guiding questions include:
What did I do in this experience? How did I do this work?
Why are those skills important? How does this experience impact my future?

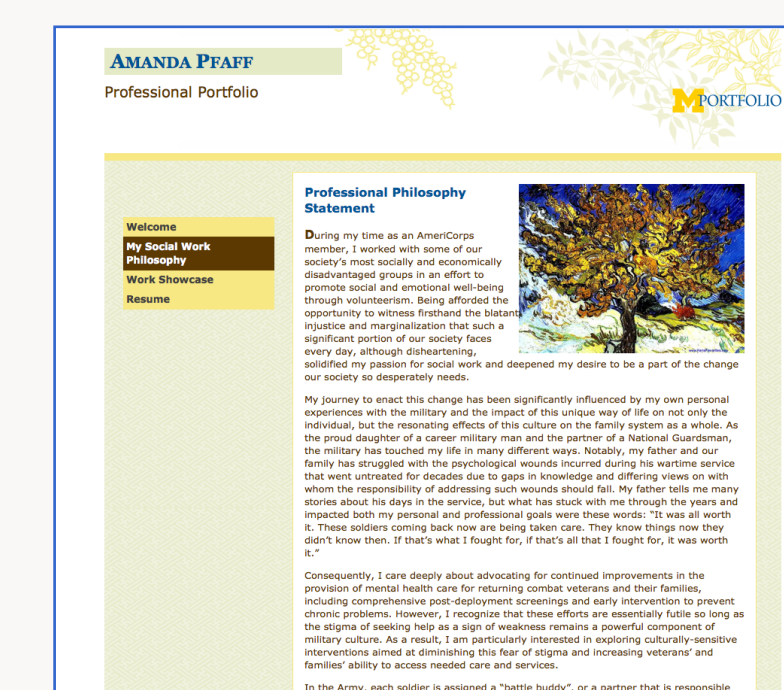
Philosophy

The philosophy statement communicates the values and themes developed over time that now guide current choices and future goals. This statement includes:

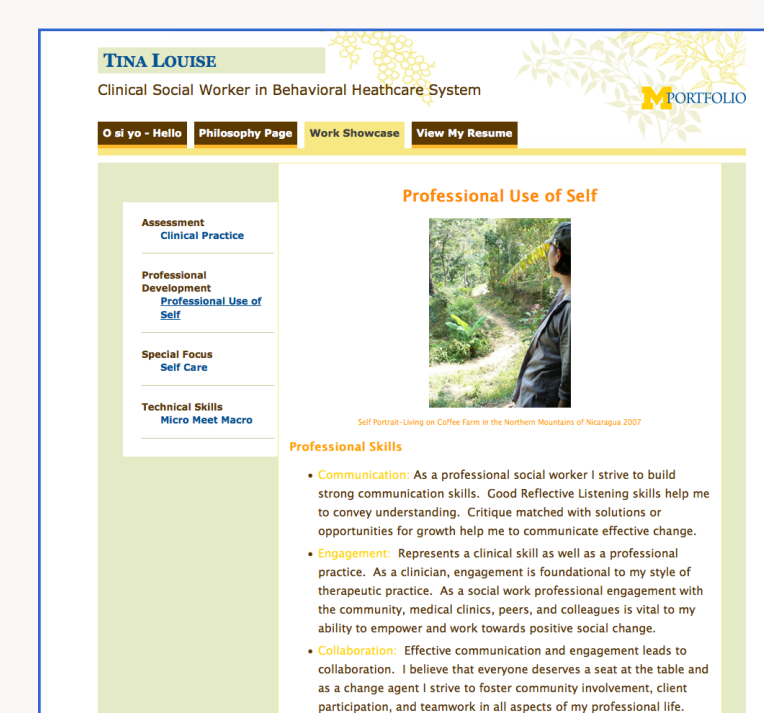
- examples of the ways in which students embody these goals in their actions
- specific experiences during which these values emerged or are most apparent
- a sense of where one has been and where one is going

Guiding questions include:
What values and beliefs do I see in my most significant learning experiences?

How do I know I have those values and beliefs?
What is my view of a socially just world?



Professional Use of Self



The professional use of self statement articulates one’s professional identity and behaviors as influenced by the core values and beliefs stated in the philosophy. This statement integrates many components to demonstrate how a student plans to approach and succeed in the practice of social work, including:

- knowledge, including an awareness of one’s multiple social identities
- social work tools/theories/skills
- life experiences
- beliefs and values
- internal reactions
- the use of self-disclosure

Guiding questions include:
What do I want people to say about me as a social worker?

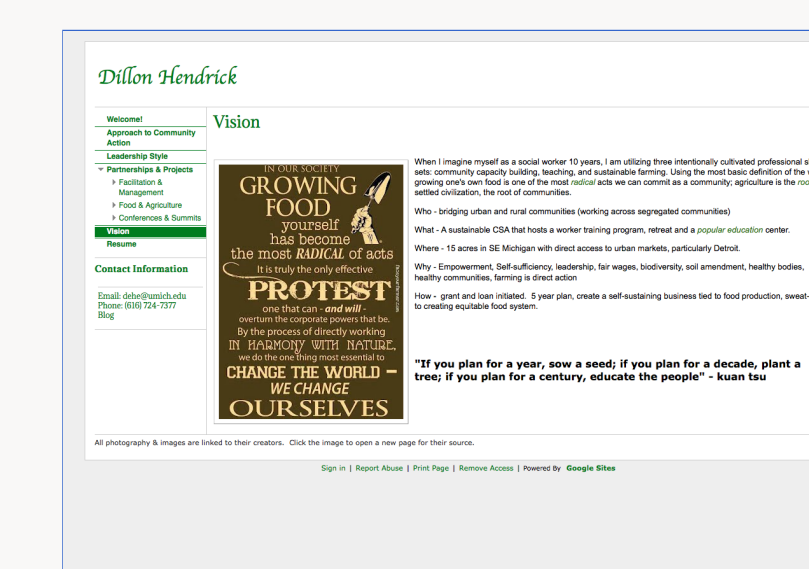
How do I want to be remembered by former clients?
How do I work for social justice in professional practice?

Vision and Goals

After assessing past accomplishments and challenges, and articulating core philosophies of practice, students then look at how this learning sheds light on future paths and possibilities. Students create a vision statement that may include a combination of short-term, long-term, personal and professional goals.

Guiding questions include:
What were my goals when I entered the program, and how have they changed?

What careers, jobs, and/or professional roles do I want to pursue?
What is my vision of social justice in future practice?



The Process of Generative Interviewing

Generative interviewing is an extremely useful peer exercise used in the portfolio process, involving one person sharing stories about a key learning experience while the partner listens for, and then reflects back, particular strengths and skills demonstrated by the storyteller that she may not otherwise know or recognize (tacit knowledge).

Generative knowledge:

- Is practical “know-how” that allows people to respond to daily life and to address complex problems
- Puts the present into a future oriented view of contingencies and possibilities
- Is embodied through lived experience (embedded in our actions, interactions,...)
- Is tacit (invisible, non-conscious) and relational and distributed (dynamic)

Outcomes

This initiative yielded several important lessons for the School of Social Work to consider in preparation for taking the project to scale.

Students

- Find both “process” and “product” to be important
- Need time to adjust to peer mentoring model
- Come in with different levels of experience and comfort with the process of self-reflection
- Benefit from guidance, structure, support, and multiple forms of mentorship
- Process should be appropriately designed to respond to developmental stages of learning

Field Instruction

- Educational Agreements (learning contracts) include integrative classroom-based assignments
- Professional behaviors and sense of self are better articulated with integrative learning methods
- Variation in experience with incorporating critical self-reflection into professional settings
- Integrative learning changes supervision approaches and highlights more mentoring and reflective practice models
- Mismatch in approaches between what school defines and expects and how field approaches supervision and assignments
- Integrative learning process is beneficial for a multifaceted educational agreement

“The portfolio process helped me to realize a multitude of capacities and skills that I already possessed, which increased my confidence and self-awareness.”

Faculty

- Variation in experience with incorporating critical self-reflection into academic settings
- Moving to an integrative learning model involves new ways of organizing and implementing a course
- Need faculty champions to promote a new pedagogical process, and need buy-in from other faculty to sustain and grow the effort
- Highlighting the role of advisor and mentor with the goal of linking classwork to fieldwork can be challenging for some faculty

Organizational

- Portfolio-based methods are not adopted across the school
- Need to provide trainings and models for ways to become more integrative in teaching and advising roles
- Need sufficient resources of time, staff availability, skill building, technology
- Portfolios can be rich source of data for learning outcomes assessment
- Integrative learning and portfolio-based methods need time to take off widely
- An emphasis on integrative learning could be critical with new reaccreditation requirements on measurement of curricular competencies

Next Steps

Objectives for scaling program-wide:

Improving Pedagogical and Educational Strategies in Social Work Education

To design a variety of opportunities for integrative and generative reflection at several points in the curriculum.

Infusing Integrative Learning Across the Curriculum

To design a hybrid and self-directed learning program for a large, complex, and diverse student body to access in multiple and flexible ways.

Utilizing New Technologies in Education and Professional Development

To assist students in developing an online identity through the use of various web-based technologies

Building Capacity in Educators

To strengthen the overall capacity for educators in both the fieldwork and classroom setting to leverage integrative learning methods for enhanced student learning.

“The portfolio process allowed me to conceptualize a guiding vision for my work as a social worker.”

References

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Risler, E. A. (1999). Student practice portfolios: Integrating diversity and learning in the field experience. *Arete*, 23(1), 89-96.

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“We rarely take the time to sit and reflect - to really seek meaning in our stories and experiences. We had the opportunity to explore our personal and professional identity, development, and growth.”