

Alternative Self-Study Project Proposal
Ability Based Learning
at the
Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences:
Phase Two

submitted to the
Commission on Accreditation
Council on Social Work Educaiton

Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio
December, 2006

Accreditation History

The School of Applied Social Sciences (now the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences) was founded in 1916 at Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve University). It soon became a charter member of the American Association of Schools of Social Work, now the Council on Social Work Education, and its Master of Science in Social Administration degree has been accredited continuously since 1919. Our most recent reaffirmation of accreditation was granted in December 2, 2001, for the full eight-year cycle ending November 2009.

Introduction

Mirroring developments in higher education over the past several decades, social work education has placed increasing emphasis on assessing program outcomes. The 1994 CSWE accreditation standards were the first to require ongoing assessment of program objectives; the EPAS standards approved in 2001 devote an entire standard (Standard 8) to program assessment and continuous improvement (Buchan, et al, 2004).

Although program assessment is now required, many programs experience difficulty designing and implementing effective program assessment and renewal plans. A recent analysis of COA citations of concern or noncompliance with specific standards showed Standard 8 to be twice to three times more problematic for programs than other standards (Council on Social Work Education, 2006).

This new emphasis on program assessment has generated high need among programs for new methods and approaches to assessment. Until recently there was little interest in the scholarly investigation of program assessment as reflected in few such publications in the Journal of Social Work Education. In 1995 Wodarski, Feit and Green reviewed the empirical research on social work education outcomes and concluded that “evaluations of social work educational methods are limited in quantity and scope” (p. 124). A 1990 nationwide survey of graduate programs’ methods for assessing outcomes (Standard 1.5 in the 1994 standards) found that the preponderance of programs relied on alumni surveys, field evaluations, grades and student course evaluations to measure educational outcomes (Garcia & Floyd, 2002). Capstone tests and assignments were used by fewer than 25% of the responding programs. Garcia and Floyd concluded that program assessment presents a “clear challenge to social work education, and graduate social work programs in particular” (p. 380) and by implication they noted the need for development of a broader array of methods and procedures for assessing program effectiveness.

This situation appears to be gradually changing, however. A newly established symposium on Educational Outcomes Assessment for the 2006 Annual Program Meeting garnered 21 abstracts – more than any of the other 22 symposiums – and organized four well-attended sessions. Similarly, a quick perusal of recent volumes of the Journal of Social Work Education shows that assessment of educational outcomes is addressed in almost every issue, and usually involves empirical analysis of the assessment methods.

Still, it would be fair to say that assessment in social work education has only reached first base – the game is far from won. We propose by this project to not only strengthen our approach to outcome assessment at the Mandel School, but to develop new knowledge that can inform and be generalized to other programs.

Ability Based Learning at the Mandel School

It was in the context of the growing interest in assessment and accountability that the faculty of the Mandel School took a bold step forward in 1994. Fueled by a new strategic plan, faculty began developing an assessment based curriculum designed around clearly identified outcomes that would become the basis for assessing student competence and program outcomes. The faculty felt an outcomes-based program would help us develop an innovative curriculum that would lead to improved student learning and self-efficacy, and would insure that our graduates are prepared to enter social work practice in the 21st century.

Five key principles guided our development of the ABLE program:

- *Student abilities (educational outcomes) drive the curriculum*
- *Abilities are developed and assessed in both classroom and field practicum*
- *Students demonstrate attainment of abilities as a condition of graduation*
- *Student self-assessment becomes a life-long professional skill*
- *Assessment of student learning leads to continuous program improvement*

Beginning in 1994 stakeholder groups including community leaders, students, alumni, faculty, employers, and social work consumers were asked to identify the skills, knowledge areas, and values necessary for effective social work practice in today's environment. This input along with a comprehensive review of the professional literature and professional accreditation standards resulted in the formulation of eight core abilities:

1. *Value a Diverse World*
2. *Communicate Effectively*
3. *Think Critically*
4. *Integrate Social Work Values and Ethics*
5. *Advocate for Social Justice*
6. *Professional Use of Self*
7. *Apply Social Work Methods*
8. *Succeed in the World of Work*

Once the abilities were identified, faculty set about developing full ability statements and designing a program to implement an outcomes-based educational model. The ABLE program is depicted graphically in Figure 1 below, with key aspects of the program enumerated as bullet points.

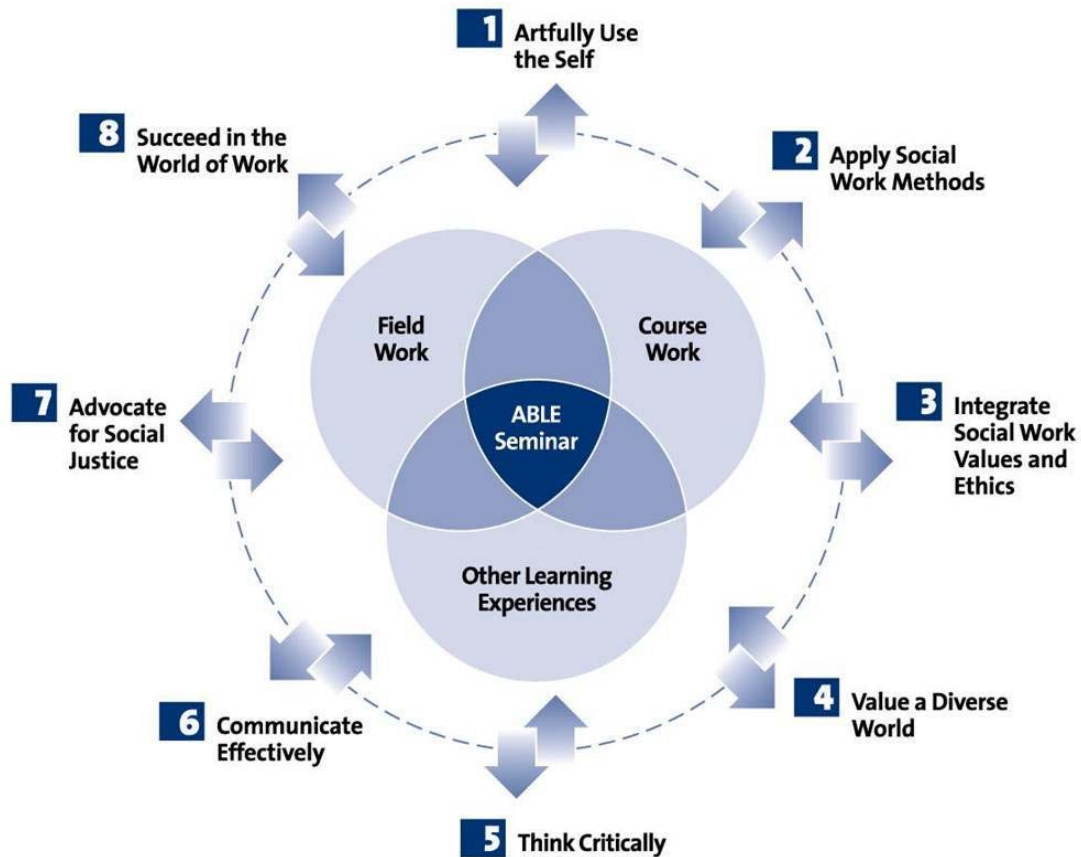


Figure 1. The Ability Based Learning Environment at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences.

- *The 8 abilities form the intellectual environment for our program, describe the outcomes we would like our students to achieve, and constitute our program objectives.*
- *The classroom curriculum, field experiences, and other learning experiences are designed to provide students the opportunity to develop and demonstrate their competence in the 8 abilities.*
- *The ABLE seminar forms the nexus of the program, the place where students integrate their learning and develop the habits of self-assessment and life-long professional development.*
- *Throughout their time in the program and at graduation students are assessed for their competence on the 8 abilities.*
- *Student competence in the 8 abilities is aggregated to determine if the program has achieved its objectives.*

In 2002, after eight years of development and planning, the Ability Based Learning Environment (ABLE) was implemented, the first comprehensive, outcomes based, graduate social work program in the United States. By May 2007 approximately 500

students will have completed the ABLE program. Most faculty have participated as ABLE seminar facilitators, and field instructors have been using the eight abilities to assess student performance. In addition, we have been collecting systematic pre/post data on a variety of outcome measures since 2002.

As might be expected with a new program, we have experienced successes and encountered challenges along the way. Our approach is to retain what is working and to change what is not working. Before implementing significant changes, however, we want to examine problem areas systematically and based on reliable new data, review of our original objectives for the ABLE program and a state-of-the-art literature review re-design those components and evaluate our success in implementing them.

The Proposed Project

Beginning with the implementation of ABLE in fall 2002 students were assigned to ABLE seminars, small learning groups of 12 to 13 students each led by a faculty member who served as facilitator, mentor and academic advisor for those students. ABLE seminars met three to five times each semester to help students develop the habit of self-assessment, integrate their classroom learning with their field experience, and develop portfolios that demonstrated their competence in the eight Abilities.

We intended these seminars to become the focal point of students' educational experience, a place where they would integrate their learning across classroom and field and develop the life-long habit of self-assessment and professional development. Our experience with the seminars has been mixed, however. Although some faculty facilitators found the seminars to be worthwhile, student response was not as positive, citing lack of clarity of purpose and little added value to their overall experience in our program. This assessment was based on seminar course evaluations, focus groups with students and faculty, and anecdotal feedback, all of this during the time students were in the program. We have yet to elicit feedback from graduates of the program, field instructors for our students, or employers of our students.

Because of the strong student reaction and mixed feedback from faculty we decided to suspend the ABLE seminars beginning in the fall of 2006, pending a systematic analysis of their strengths and limitations. Our expectation is to re-institute the seminars in fall 2008 after we have been able to re-design the seminars based on our analysis. We believe the seminars are a key part of the ABLE program we are committed to changing and improving them to make our program and the very best it can be.

We expect the seminars will continue in their present basic form, but will be tied to field education rather than continue as free-standing seminars. Our philosophy is that knowledge, skills and values are expressed in the "doing" of that knowledge, particularly for the professions, and field education is the predominant place in social work education where students have an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. Thus, the integration of classroom learning and field experience can best occur in the context of field education,

and the demonstration and assessment of student abilities likewise may occur best in the context of field.

Supporting the need to re-design the ABLE seminar, pre/post data we have collected since 2002 and a variety of other data suggest a need to significantly strengthen the skills building part of our curriculum. This became a major objective of our most recent strategic plan, and resulted in the development of two new courses in practice skills. We believe the ABLE seminars can and should take on a key role in assessing students' practice skills, and guiding them in the "doing" of what they know and value.

Benefits for Social Work Education

How will our project benefit social work education generally? The Mandel School used a systematic data-driven approach to identify program outcomes and then designed an innovative educational program to teach to those outcomes. We believe the abilities we have identified are of use to other programs, and in fact have already been adopted by several programs. Further, we have systematically gathered quantitative pre-post outcome data since 2002, as well as qualitative process data, which provide a rich source of information to improve our program. The ABLE seminars that we will focus on in this project are critical to the overall success of the program and form the nexus of the educational experience for students, a place where they learn the habits of self-assessment and lifelong professional development, a hallmark of our program. We believe our experience over the past four years provides a sound basis for re-inventing the ABLE seminars, and that the methods and procedures we develop and test will be of use to other programs.

Project Design

Spring/Summer 2007

- Organize, analyze and synthesize existing data on the ABLE seminars.
- Conduct qualitative interviews with a broad range of students who participated in the ABLE seminars to learn more about what the benefits and limitations were, and their suggestions for improving the program.
- Conduct interviews with selected field instructors and employers of our graduates to find out what they see as the impact of the abilities in general, and to the extent they are familiar with it their assessment of the ABLE seminar.
- Conduct a state-of-the-art review (literature, interviews, etc.) of integrative seminars in social work and related professions to find out what has been shown to be most effective.
- Consult experts on student assessment-as-learning, reflective practice, and skills training.

Fall 2007

- Complete data collection and analysis.
- Report findings to faculty and begin re-designing the seminar.

Spring 2008

- Complete design and implementation plan for new integrative seminar
- Perhaps pilot test features of the new seminar.
- Complete an evaluation design that will tell us what is working with the new seminar and what we need to improve.
- Prepare for implementation in fall 2008.

Fall 2008

- Implement the new seminar for all incoming students.
- Gather intensive formative data from students and faculty participating in the new seminars to help us gauge their success in relation to our objectives for the seminars.

Spring 2009 (reaffirmation site visit)

- Report on our formative assessment of the new integrative seminars and make minor changes as needed.

Fall 2009

- Make additional adjustments in the new seminar, if needed, based on the feedback we received in 2008-2009
- Disseminate findings

We will fund this project from funds already designated for the ABLE program. The project will be directed by Professor Wallace Gingerich who will be given half time course release to direct and execute the project. An MSASS doctoral student will devote one day per week to the project. Overall evaluation of the ABLE program is guided by an advisory committee composed of four faculty members.

Dissemination Plans

We will present our findings on the re-designed ABLE seminar at CSWE APMs and other educational conferences, and will submit articles for publication in the Journal on Social Work Education and other education journals. A listing of presentations and publications to date is included below to demonstrate our capacity to disseminate findings.

Note: We received exempt status from the Case Western Reserve University Institution Review Board for educational research on our ABLE program in September, 2002. In spring 2007 we will submit an updated human subjects protocol that will include the proposed project described herein.

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ABLE Related Presentations and Publications

- Barker, S. L. (2006, February). Values and ethics: Assessment in social work education. Paper presented at the Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education, Chicago, IL.
- Gingerich, W. J. (2005, February). Identifying educational outcomes. Paper presented at the Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education, New York, NY.
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- Gingerich, W. J., Kaye, K. M., Boitel, C., & Wood, Z. B. (2003, February). ABLE: Creating an environment for competency-based learning. Paper presented at the Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education, Atlanta, GA.
- Gingerich, W. J., Wood, Z. B., & Cahoy, D. (2006, February). An empirical analysis of self-efficacy and licensure exam data as outcome indicators. Paper presented at the Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education, Chicago, IL.
- Krentzman, A. (2006, February). Review of multidisciplinary measures of cultural competence. Paper presented at the Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education, Chicago, IL.
- Rawlings, M. A., Townsend, A. L., & Gingerich, W. J. (2005, January). A psychometric analysis of the social work self-efficacy scale. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Social Work and Research, Miami, FL.
- Rawlings, M. A., Townsend, A. L., & Gingerich, W. J. (2005, February). Are BSW students really advanced? A comparative study of social work self-efficacy. Paper presented at the Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education, New York, NY.
- Wood, Z. W., & Gingerich, W. J. (2005, February). Outcome assessment in graduate social work education: A work in progress. Paper presented at the Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education, New York, NY.
Response to COA request for more information on formative data collection.

**Ability Based Learning at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences:
Phase Two**

Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio

The Commission on Accreditation, in its letter dated January 29, 2007, requested additional information on the formative data we propose to collect in our project. We will respond to each of the four questions in turn:

(1) Will you be assessing the fidelity of the implementation of the seminars against your intent?"

This is a very important question, particularly given the uneven implementation of our first generation ABLE seminars, and we thank the Commission for bringing it to our attention.

The fully developed second generation seminars will have course objectives, a topical outline, specified teaching/learning activities, and assessments. We will develop brief scales for instructors and students to rate the fidelity of the seminars with the stated objectives, and will use these scales periodically throughout the semester. We will also use focus groups to debrief both students and instructors during the semester to gather formative information on what is working well, and what aspects of the seminars need additional development and refinement. We expect these formative data to be particularly useful to us in identifying potential conceptual and implementation problems early on, and in fine-tuning the teaching/learning activities during the first several times the seminars are offered.

The fidelity scales and instructions for their use will be included in the seminar manual we will prepare for dissemination (see #2 below).

(2) Will you have documentation that could lead to creating a seminar manual that could be used by others?

This is a very useful suggestion. Although it takes us a bit beyond our immediate concern – development of our own seminar – it provides an important means by which we can share our work with other programs and thereby contribute to social work education more broadly.

The tentative outline for the seminar manual includes the following:

- I. Ability Based Learning as an overall conceptual framework
- II. Conceptual design and learning objectives of the integrated seminar
- III. Topical outline, learning activities, assessments
- IV. Use of regular formative assessment
- V. Staffing issues – competencies required, staff development, support
- VI. Practical issues – scheduling, format, academic credit, grading, coordination with practicum and concentrations
- VII. Potential challenges and how to deal with them
- VIII. Appendices
 - a. Sample syllabus
 - b. Assessment tools – student self-assessments; instructor assessments
 - c. Course evaluation form
 - d. Fidelity tools
 - e. Instructor development topics and strategies

An initial draft of the seminar manual available at the time we submit our self-study in spring 2009, but revisions will likely be needed based on our assessment of the seminars after the first several times they are offered (the first seminars will be offered in fall 2008).

(3) Will students be monitoring their own process in achievement of the competencies?

Our plan is to place the integrative seminars in the context of field education – in effect using the student’s performance in field education as the primary basis on which to assess their abilities. Currently our field learning contracts and evaluations are organized around the eight abilities, and students and field instructors independently assess students’ performance using multiple indicators of each ability. We plan to broaden the learning contract and performance evaluation to include the classroom component of the student’s learning experience, thus the integrated seminar will be the place where students bring together their learning across all components of the curriculum and assess their development in relation to the eight abilities.

As is the case with most programs, we find little meaningful variability in student and field instructor ratings of student performance, and this is one of the issues we will be addressing as we design the seminars (specifically, the assessment tools). While numeric ratings seem on the surface to have objectivity and validity, in our experience qualitative comments seem to be more meaningful. Thus, we will be exploring qualitative assessment as well as quantitative assessment of student performance on the abilities. We have used student portfolios in the past with limited success, but will revisit that as one possible way to structure qualitative information about student performance and elicit assessments from multiple assessors (the student, peers, field instructor, seminar instructor, classroom instructors, etc.).

However we ultimately decide to assess student learning, students will continue to assess their own learning in addition to assessments by field and classroom instructors. Self-assessment and ongoing professional development are hallmarks of our Ability Based Learning Environment – in effect the “ninth ability” – and we will continue that emphasis in the integrative seminar as well as our classroom and field education courses.

(4) Will you compare student perceptions of competency achievement to other measures that you obtain as part of your assessment plan, e.g., assessments by field instructors?

As noted above, we now collect information from both students and field instructors on the student’s performance in field practicum. In our concept of abilities, the student’s knowledge, values and skills are evidenced in the “doing” or application of that knowledge. Accordingly, field practicum becomes a critical context for assessing student competence.

Our plan is to incorporate classroom learning into the field contracts and evaluations, along with practicum based learning, which will provide for a broader and more integrated assessment of student learning. We will continue to gather field instructor assessment of student learning, but will also add assessments of other instructors (seminar, classroom) and student peers. We expect differences in assessments from multiple assessors will promote critical analysis of what it means to be competent in the abilities. We want students to become critical and realistic assessors of their own abilities, and to develop the habit of assessing their abilities to provide a solid foundation for life-long professional development.

In addition to the qualitative assessment of field and classroom instructors, we will be comparing student perceptions of competence with “objective” measures we also gather, particularly the Social Work Self-Efficacy Scale and the practice version of the Masters License Exam. We will also correlate student self assessments with other indicators such as grades in classroom and field, and possibly additional outcome measures we may add (e.g., cultural competence, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, etc.).