



ERPA 2014

Benefiting from the popular films integrated into the curriculum in boosting the efficacy of the social work education

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Abstract

Benefiting from visuals both in every facet of social sciences in broad terms and in social work education in narrow terms improves students' learning significantly. It is a known fact that learning a material by hearing, watching and discussing altogether can increase the efficiency of learning up to ninety per cent. Besides, it is aimed that especially the social work students whose curriculum is designed in a way that they can work with people from all aspects of life and with all kinds of problems are provided with different methods together with lectures and practical training. Thus, they graduate as people who are ready to work with different client and problem groups after a four-year-education. From this aspect, the effectiveness of adding both the materials which are specifically prepared for the lessons and the popular films for the general public to the syllabus is indisputable. It is stated in literature that integrating films into curriculum in various fields and providing students with audio and visual materials contributes to the effectiveness of learning outcomes. It is also possible to come across various resources concerning making use of the popular films especially in the fields such as social problems, counseling skills, cultural studies, developmental psychology, clinical psychology and psychiatry. This paper specifically argues how integrating the popular films into the curriculum in the various fields of the social work education would affect the learning outcomes of the prospective social workers positively and supports the thesis with some sample cases and films.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the ERPA Congress 2014.

Keywords:

1. Introduction

When the undergraduate curriculum of social work both in Turkey and worldwide is analyzed, it can be seen that the information is attempted to be given to the students in a rather large scale. In this context, it can be considered

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that social work education is mostly designed in multi-disciplinary approach, and the field of social work occurs as an independent discipline by forming its own scientific knowledge thanks to these pieces the information. A good deal of common information from the fields of psychology, sociology, political sciences, pedagogy and psychological counselling is often used by social work academicians, students and social workers who work in the field especially within the curriculum.

From the point of academicians who work in the field of social work, it seems rather important to try to benefit from as many tools as possible in order to transfer the social work education, which is in such a close relationship with the field of social work, to the students effectively. Besides, the students of social work, which is an applied science, are expected to finish their undergraduate studies as graduates equipped with the skills which enable them to work with various client groups. Hence, field practices taking long hours in the curriculum of third and fourth years are important. Field practices start in the summer semester between second and third years in most of the schools of social work, and these practices continue until graduation in such a way that they cover various fields and problem groups. Especially during the last semester of the fourth year, students are trained in the field spending all of their time there.

Moreover, in the first year and later on, nominating the practitioners from the field as guest instructors or inviting them to the lessons are some of the practices that can be seen in social work education. Thus, the aim is to ensure the social work students to be connected with the field in every phase of the education.

However, despite all, the change all over the world in the social work education with the 2000s and the transformation of education to a universal approach cannot always be sufficient to prepare the social work students, who will possibly work with groups of clients in almost infinite numbers, for the field. In other words, combining the practice with classroom instruction is accepted as one of the biggest problems of the undergraduate education of the social work.

2. Using popular films in education

It is stated in the literature that the efficiency increases up to 90 percent when a student studies a material by hearing, watching and discussing altogether with the help of an effective learning method (Demirel, 2002). When the issue is taken into consideration from this point, while the effectiveness using visual materials that are specifically prepared for the lessons (films, video clips, presentation, etc.) is not a matter of discussion (Liles, 2007), especially recently, various studies over the issue of using popular films and serials that are not specifically prepared for the lessons and that address the general viewers as an educational material have started to increase in number (Demmit, 1998; Gladding, 1994; Hudack, Warden, 2001). As mentioned before, making use of films is of great importance in terms of both the recognition of the effectiveness of using them for educational purposes in the literature and filling the gap between practice and classroom environment (Downey, Jackson, Puig, and Furman, 2003). When we examine the diversity and the content of the films shot up to now, we can easily see that there are various films about almost all of the topics that a social work student is interested in throughout his/her university life.

Compared to many exposition-narration methods used in education, making use of films in education has more advantages in terms of not only being auditory but also enabling the audience to grasp and to evaluate the context visually. When the literature is reviewed, it is possible to come across various resources about the usage of popular films in the training in the fields such as social problems, counselling skills, cultural studies, development, psychology and psychiatry (Dressel, 1990, Vinton & Harrington, 1994, Dowd, 1999, Corcoran, 1999, Pescosolido, 1990). It is also a fact that, apart from all these, using popular films in education relieves both the instructor and the student of the routine of the lessons and reduces the burnout which is experienced by both parties in education environment. Gladstein and Feldstein (1983) stated that benefiting from films in education contributes significantly to the development of the ability to empathize in students, which is one of the basic issues in social work education. Moreover, thanks to the films being able to observe and evaluate non-verbal behaviours, along with verbal behaviours, like in a laboratory is another important advantage of using popular films in education (Shepard, Brew, 2005). Finally, it shouldn't be forgotten that benefiting from films involves the students who seem as a recipient when they are inactive in the education actively, and this affects learning substantially positively.

Downey and his colleagues (2003) stated in their study about benefiting from the films in education that majority of the students (90%) pointed out the significant role of the films used in the lessons on the promotion of the reading

skills and the lesson. Besides, when the age groups were examined, it was found out that the films had significantly more effect on the younger group. When the same study is analyzed qualitatively, the expressions which are often repeated by the students who have participated in the study such as "I have read the book, but the film was more impressive", "the film has helped me a lot more to understand the abstract concepts that we have discussed in class" have been considered as significant and noted down.

3. Using popular films in social work education

The film "Ordinary People" sets a quite good example in terms of making use of the films in the training sessions of family counselling and in the curriculum of the social work education. Maynard (1996) has stated that benefiting from the other methods besides having a standard lesson in family counselling lessons increases especially the permanence of learning, the students' ability to solve problems, transfer of the new input to the new situations and their motivation to get more input. Maynard benefited from the film "Ordinary People" in his own study and gave the family counselling lessons to his students in two sets. In the first set, he asked the students to watch the film and evaluate the characters' psychology and the therapy process in the film. Then, these evaluations were discussed in class. In the second set, he asked the students to produce a new therapy program in groups for the same family within the scope of a basic theory of family counselling. These productions were discussed in class, too. Maynard stated that this method, compared to the classical methods, enhanced student learning, and the student feedback was quite positive. One of the most significant virtues of this method for the students is that it shows how to evaluate the same family with different theoretical frameworks and manage a counselling process. Shepard and Brew (2005) mentioned the constructive effect of making use of the film on students in a study they carried out (object relations theory) using the same film. Another researcher who used the film "Ordinary People" in family counselling trainings is Stinchfield (2006). He brought the film up for discussion with his students on the basis of the outline he had prepared and taught Olson's Family Circumplex Model to his students through the analysis of this film. Stinchfield has suggested in this study that benefiting from the films especially in family counselling has a significant effect on the students' perceptual and conceptual skills, and such kind of an interactive learning environment affects students much more positively than classical case studies.

Ello (2007) carried out a study about benefiting from the popular films in the subject of working with older people in the lesson of social work with older people. His impetus was the students' being worried and hesitant about working with the elderly despite the increasing need in the field of the elderly care as a result of the increase in the population of the elderly. In his study, Ello (2007) benefited from various films in the trainings he provided for his students about the physical and mental changes the elderly goes through, family dynamics, drug addiction problems, retirement and sexuality. He stated that after these trainings in which he intensely used films, the students who see and have contact with a certain number of elderly people, who are generally family members, started to have more insight about being old, freed themselves from negative ideas, became more aware of the old age problems and started to have less fear and anxiety all thanks to the films.

An important issue in social work education is social policy. Shdaimah has suggested and practiced a 7-stage model in a study he has carried out about benefiting from the films in social policy lessons. Here, the lesson which firstly starts with a theoretical lecture then continues with big group and small group discussions with regard to the social policy. After a break, students watch a documentary which is significant in terms of social policy, and then they talk about their first impressions. Finally, whole class revisits what they have learnt in the first hour under the instructor's guidance.

Another important pillar of the social work education is regarded as the skill pillar. At this point, Koch and Dollarhide (2000) have benefited from the film *Good Will Hunting* in the process of having students acquire counselling skills. In this study, the researcher started with a short discussion before the film and asked the students to write a report after watching the film concerning the language the professor in the film used, the therapeutic relationship and making use of the silence during counselling. The same method, together with various counselling theories, has been used throughout the semester, and a general evaluation has been carried out at the end of the semester. Koch and Dollarhide (2000) have stated in the review at the end of the year that the films have a significantly positive effect on the teaching of counselling skills. They have also argued that having a lesson with the

help of films promotes in-class participation and energy, and the students sometimes get more input from the films than they do from the books.

The third most important pillar which social work education aims for students is professional ethics. Although the number of studies which focus on how social work specialists are represented in the films is limited, Freeman and Valentine (2004) analyzed 47 films. The social workers in these films are mostly pictured as white women who provide counselling in micro level, who have unethical relationships with their clients and who ignore the clients' self determination. Based on this study, it can be said that to maintain the discussions about ethics in education on the basis of these films will also provide a vital material for students.

4. Limitations

It is thought that the usage of popular films either in social work education, or in education in a general sense, provides us with both various positive contributions and distinctive negative limitations which are certainly important to be analyzed. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind that these films are produced with the aim of entertainment, and it can be said that these popular films are not true representations of daily life in a detailed way, yet they romanticize them and the reality becomes the minimal representations in many ways. In addition, it is also necessary for the students and academicians of social work education to keep in mind that those films, which are especially produced to be sold to get the market profit in a higher rank, have an ideological function and a narration which reproduces the existing relations, the status quo. Moreover, making use of films with social work students especially in the classroom might generate various risks in terms of the problems in the film selection and screening process, and the fact that their emotional influence on each student which cannot be forecast. Besides, it can be difficult to control the unintended messages captured by students together with the educational outcomes aimed in films. It seems important to pay attention to these especially in ethical issues.

5. Conclusion

It is inevitable for a disciple like social work, which includes a lot of disciplines of social sciences within its curriculum and expects students to have skills in micro, mezzo and macro level altogether, to try new techniques to improve the learning outcomes. Along with the field practices and the instructors coming from the field, using films as a visual is regarded rather significant in terms of students' learning the principle of not only knowledge but also skills and value. Numerous studies about the issue evidently reflects the effectiveness of using films in social work education, notably in the field of family counselling.

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