Please provide feedback

Hashtag Immigration: Using Twitter as an Advocacy Platform in Social Work Education

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Abstract

The Trump administration's immigration policies have, over the course of four years, had a chilling effect on immigrant communities throughout the United States (US). The policies have repeatedly conflicted with social work ethical principles, resulting in forcibly separating children from their families, discriminating against immigrants based on their faith, and casting a pall of fear over immigrant communities throughout the US. Among the social work profession's ethical principles is the pursuit of social justice. The ethical principles of the social work profession are further reflected in social work education competencies including engaging in policy practice to advance justice. Social media platforms are innovative vehicles to engage in social work advocacy. Using immigration policies that conflict with social work ethical principles as context, this paper provides details of a classroom activity that teaches social work students how to use Twitter to engage in policy practice focused on immigration policies. Guided by experiential learning theory, the classroom activity can serve as a template for future pedagogical advancements as social media technologies continue to develop.

Introduction

Immigration policy has changed significantly in recent years and in particular during the Trump administration, with an increase of anti-immigrant policies, policy proposals, and executive actions (Pierce & Bolter, 2020; Finley & Esposito, 2020) which have had a chilling effect on immigrant communities throughout the United States. Many of these policies including the the travel ban on immigrants from Muslim majority countries (Executive Order 13769, titled Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States); "zero tolerance" enforcement forcibly separating families at the US Southern Border in 2018 (Executive Order 13841, Affording Congress an Opportunity to Address Family Separation); the public charge rule placing legal residents at-risk for denial of status adjustments; and substantial cuts and revisions to the US Refugee Resettlement Program through the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions in 2018 and again in 2019 (Immigration and Nationality Act 8 U.S.C. 1157)– conflict with various ethical principles in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017). The social work profession has engaged in policy analysis to highlight these conflicts, including in response to the zero tolerance policy and subsequent separation of immigrant children from their families (Franciset al, 2018; National Association of Deans and Directors of Social Work Programs [NADD], 2018; NASW; 2018). Moreover, the social work profession has actively advocated against various policy changes negatively impacting immigrants including the public charge rule and family separation at the US southern border (NASW, 2018; NASW, 2020) and has called on social workers to engage in advocacy on policy with implications for vulnerable immigrant populations. This provides evidence of social work's important role in advancing social justice through policy advocacy and

organizing against policies that further marginalize vulnerable individuals, groups, and communities.

Activism in Social Work Practice

Political involvement has been a critical aspect of the social work profession since its inception as an occupation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Stuart, 2013). The "political consciousness" of early social workers developed from their work in child welfare organizations, Charity Organization Societies (COS), and the settlement houses as practicing social workers came to realize that individual level interventions were not sufficient to address needs facing people in their communities (Reisch & Jani, 2012; Stuart, 2013). As such, social workers engaged in political action by working with community groups, neighborhoods, and organizations to create policy change that would empower and improve the lives of those whom social workers interacted with in the day-to-day (Andrews & Reisch, 2002; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Stuart, 2013). One of the earliest examples of this was through the work of social work "radicals" including Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in the settlement movement as settlement workers organized with labor unions, lobbied city officials for improved sanitation and housing reforms, and advocated against discrimination in employment (Andrews & Reisch, 2002).

Since then, social workers have continued to advocate for policy change as it pertains to marginalized groups relevant to the politics and culture of their time. During the Great Depression, social workers advocated for improved standards of living for all Americans, fought to influence the New Deal and the Social Security Act to expand social service programs and economic support to those in need (Stuart, 2013). Social workers have engaged in various macro efforts to influence social change including in the civil rights movement, juvenile justice reform,

child welfare programming, healthcare policy, and immigration policy (Andrews & Reisch, 2002; Stuart, 2013).

Recognizing the importance of advocacy and macro level interventions for social justice, social work professional codes and educational standards specifically address advocacy in social work. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) underscores the importance of teaching advocacy to emerging social work professionals. Social work education competencies including advancing human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice (competency 3), as well as engaging in policy practice (competency 5) (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). The responsibility to advocate as a social worker requires active engagement and that social workers, "apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice" (CSWE, 2015, p. 8). In a rapidly changing immigration policy context, social work students should be equipped with knowledge and relevant tools to engage in policy advocacy, using social work values and ethical principles and CSWE education competencies as a guide.

Macro level social work is grounded in community organizing, policy practice, and administration. NASW Ethical Standard 6.04(c) discusses the role of policy advocacy as it relates to the systems level and promoting, "policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people." (NASW, 2017) Community organizing and advocacy work in tandem to effectively organize and empower those who are marginalized in US communities. Social workers have historically used modern tools to influence policy including community organizing (Brady et al., 2015; Stuart, 2013), voting and efforts to expand voter rights (Abramovitz et al., 2019), and lobbying (Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). In today's technological world, social media can be extremely helpful in advancing the goals of advocacy

platforms, and one such tool to help accomplish this is the social media platform, Twitter (Brady et al., 2015).

Technology in Social Work Practice

It has become increasingly important that social worker practitioners, educators, and students become adept in using technology and media platforms in education and practice. In the past two decades, new and rapidly changing technological advancements have influenced the learning environment in college classrooms. Furthermore, as the use of telehealth in practice has increased in the past decade, the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing guidelines have brought a substantial increase in the use and scope of telehealth in social work (Canady, 2020). The use of digital media in advocacy has also become increasingly common and evidence has shown its effectiveness in organizing for social change (Brady, 2015). Social media enhances communication across multiple groups of people, and Twitter in particular is a unique vehicle for communicating in a condensed blog format.

Twitter is a social media platform that approximately 22% of US citizens use (Hughes & Wojcik, 2019). A growing body of evidence indicates that Twitter can be used as a pedagogical tool in social work education (Hitchcock, 2014; Hitchcock & Battista, 2013; Teixeira & Hash, 2017). Hitchcock and Battista (2013) explain that "Social work students who use social media in the structured environment of the classroom will be well-equipped to locate and evaluate research, communicate with other professionals, and advocate for social change in communities" (p. 43). In addition to facilitating learning in classroom settings, evidence also suggests Twitter can promote learning opportunities in field education settings (Hitchcock, 2014). Teixeira and Hash (2017) examined the use of Twitter as a macro social work tool in a bachelor's level Human Behavior in the Social Environment course. Forty-five students responded to a survey

that assessed student experiences using Twitter as a learning as well as practice tool. Results indicate students agree that Twitter is a useful professional tool, and can be used to promote justice in practice settings (Teixeira & Hash, 2017).

Technology and Changing Pedagogies in the Classroom

The following interactive classroom exercise builds on existing research supporting the utility of Twitter in social work education (Hitchcock & Batista, 2013; Teixeira & Hash, 2017), and will apply Twitter as an educational and practice tool to the context of changing immigration policies that social work addresses (Francis et al. 2018). The activity will help social work students to both build skills in advocacy, and content knowledge on immigration with the hopes that organizing and advocacy efforts will continue in both their personal and professional lives.

The interactive classroom exercise is guided by experiential learning theory, which posits that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). There are two important assumptions that guide experiential learning theory and are applicable to social work education. First, adapting and learning are more important than content and outcomes. How students react to new information and adapt is critical to the process of learning and integrating new knowledge, rather than solely focusing on outcomes. In social work, adapting to changing circumstances is an important skill set, particularly when encountering and accompanying individuals or communities experiencing vulnerability. Second, acquiring knowledge is a transformation process that is iterative, and constantly being created and recreated. Relationships are the foundation of initiating and sustaining change in social work practice, and acquiring new information is a meaning making process that involves creating and recreating knowledge that can drive change (Kolb, 1984).

Experiential learning theory has been used to influence several aspects of social work education, including field education (Raschick, et al.,1998). Pugh (2014) also used experiential learning theory to guide a learning exercise that helped graduate social work students understand the role of internalized bias and how it can impede social work practice. Similarly, Kenney and Young (2019) used experiential learning theory to help social work students understand the impact of food insecurity on individual and family wellbeing. The experiential learning theoretical framework is an important lens for understanding specific steps of the interactive classroom activity.

At the start of the interactive activity, students will first organize into small groups and will be given two documents. The first document will be a printed news story that details the implementation of a new immigration policy. The second document will be a handout that details the NASW values and ethical principles of the social work profession: 1) Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems; 2) Social workers challenge social injustice; 3) Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person; 4) Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships; 5) Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner; 6) Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise (NASW, 2017).

Next, in small groups, students will be asked to read the brief news story and complete the following two steps:

A. Using NASW values and ethical principles, students will decide if the policy as described in the news story aligns or conflicts with social work values and ethical principles.

B. Students will be asked to write a "Tweet" (240 characters or less) for each of the six values that communicates why and how the policy aligns or conflicts with NASW values and ethical principles.

C. Students will share their tweets aloud (on poster board, or in a simple powerpoint presentation) for the class, and engage in a larger conversation.

By reading and responding to the news story by constructing Tweets, students will engage in adapting and learning to new content, which is a key component of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). In addition, creating a Tweet for each ethical principle is an iterative process, requiring applied critical thinking skills, which also aligns with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Small groups will then have an opportunity to reflect on the exercise, and share which ethical principle was easiest to apply as a guide for the tweet, and why. Discussion questions for the classroom reflection and tying the exercise to organizing and advocacy topics can be found in appendix A.

Conclusion

During the past four years there has been substantial changes to immigration policy at the federal level that have further marginalized vulnerable individuals, weakened family units, and impacted immigrant communities throughout the US. Political engagement and activism has been a critical component since the founding of social work, and today advancing policy practice is a core competency of social work education. In addition, policy advocacy is part of the NASW Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. To aid social work students in their training as advocates and policy practitioners, this interactive classroom activity teaches students how to harness technology as part of advocacy efforts, specifically focused on vulnerable immigrant

populations. As technology continues to advance, this paper can serve as a template for future

pedagogical improvements in social work education.

Appendix A

Group Discussion Framework

In this appendix we provide additional resources for the classroom conversation that follows this activity. Instructors can use any combination of the discussion questions below depending on the context of the class and emphasis they desire as part of their learning objectives.

● How does this activity highlight the use of Twitter as an organizing tool? For persons who are personally or professionally interested in the topic of advancing human rights and social justice for immigrants, how can they use the tweets developed in this exercise as a both a mobilizing and an educational strategy?

● If you were to develop a more comprehensive advocacy approach in efforts to influence political action on the bill discussed in the exercise, what steps would you take in addition to using Twitter?

● Who is impacted by this policy? Are certain groups further marginalized by the implementation of this policy? Do certain groups benefit from this policy?

● In what ways has structural racism in the United States led to the passing/proposal of this policy or others like it?

● If you were to be the one writing this policy, what changes would you suggest?

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