**Instructors’ Preface to *Introduction to Competency-Based Social Work***

**Second Edition**

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The intent of this book is to provide you with a conceptual framework for helping students think about competency-based social work, and if they so choose, develop a foundation for their professional identities as competent social work practitioners. We agree that this is not an easy task to accomplish in one book, or even in one introductory course. However, we also know that there is incredible creativity among social work educators, and many of you may have found ways of integrating textbooks and other materials to provide students with invaluable experiences that engage them in our cherished profession. We assume that many of you, like us, struggle with finding the right balance of information about our profession as well as meaningful dialogue and experiential activities that will help guide well-meaning students to discover whether social work is their desired career path.

We believe that you will find that this book provides a good balance of information about our profession and opportunity for you to engage students in meaningful dialogue about why we do what we do as social workers. Social work is one of the most rewarding and challenging professions where our identity and purpose, “*Why we do*,”always informs the methods of practice, “*What we do*.”If your students finish the book feeling welcomed to the profession and encouraged by what lies ahead, the book will have fulfilled its purpose.

The social work profession has evolved significantly. One change in particular has sparked a paradigm shift in how educators prepare students to become social workers. Instead of calling attention to what students learn in their courses, social work education now emphasizes what students should be able to do upon graduation. From the initial introductory courses to the last year of study, the social work curriculum focuses on preparing students for competent practice. A main purpose of this book is to provide students with a vision of what competently prepared social workers are capable of doing. By the end of the book, your students will have a comprehensive grasp of the core competencies and practice behaviors of professional social work. They will also develop and demonstrate the foundation for their own competent practice.

The transition to competence-based social work changes what needs to be addressed in an introductory course. Intro texts geared simply towards presenting students with a lot of content are no longer relevant for social work education. Our review of the current texts available to educators and students is what led us to write this book. We discovered that current intro books tend to be anthologies of general, summarized material. While they offer a lot of content, they do little to help students prepare for competence-based social work. The purpose of our book goes beyond transmitting a lot of material to students. The book is intended to help you provide students with a conceptual framework for thinking about competence-based social work and help them develop a foundation for their professional identities. The framework will help your students organize the core competencies and subsequent practice behaviors of social work into two meaningful and overlapping categories—Professional Identity, *“Why we do*,”and Method of Social Work, *“What we do*.” The themes of most chapters and use of the Case-Based Learning (CBL) method throughout the text will help students begin to develop their professional identities as social workers.

<A>Case-Based Learning

CBL serves as the instructional method for the text. CBL dates back to the early 1900s when the Harvard Law School began experimenting with cases. In a similar fashion, early social work education programs (pre-dating the university-based programs at the turn of the 20th century) used CBL (Cossom, 1991; Jones, 2003). Today, CBL is seen as a way to create a learner-centered educational environment. CBL incorporates a participatory and cooperative learning approach to the traditional, hybrid, or virtual classroom. Thirty-three case vignettes will help students use the content in the chapters to develop and demonstrate competency with the information. The case vignettes describe social workers in situations involving decisions, challenges, or issues where there is more than one right answer or direction. Students will have to use the information in the chapters and their analytic skills to address the cases and then discuss them with their peers and instructor (Erskine, Leenders, & Mauffette-Leenders, 1998). The benefits of using CBL include significantly improving student retention, critical thinking skills, higher order thinking on Bloom’s taxonomy of learning, ability to make objective judgments, identify relevant issues and multiple perspectives, and develop awareness for ethical issues in social work practice (Prince & Felder, 2007).

The objective of social work education is to equip students with the ability to use what they learn in their daily practice. Competent social workers are able to retrieve and apply their knowledge and values in a manner that is appropriate to diverse situations. CBL will help social work students apply their knowledge within diverse contexts that they will encounter in the future. Cognitive psychologists have identified the importance of integrating new knowledge into existing knowledge while creating frameworks to organize, retain, retrieve, and use information (Barrows, 1985). CBL draws upon the existing knowledge and experiences of students while introducing new concepts, theories, and practices within a framework that can promote retention and retrieval (Jones, 2003).

This book uses CBL in a specific way to create an interactive introductory learning experience. As your students are likely taking their first social work course, most of the information and knowledge specific to social work will be new. Their existing knowledge will likely come from other courses, personal experiences with social workers, and perceptions developed and informed by peers, the media, and other popular sources. A central theme of all the case vignettes, therefore, is to expose students to social workers from diverse backgrounds. The cases describe social workers practicing at the various levels of practice, in very different settings and locations. Stated differently, the case vignettes serve to present students with a window into the many career possibilities of social work. To emphasize this diversity, all the case vignettes are organized in the same way—a section focusing on the background, preparation, and experience of the social worker, a section describing the context of practice, and a section presenting students with a practice situation.

The end of each chapter includes a section of discussion questions. Most of the questions are for cases from the same chapter. A few chapters (chapters 6, 7, and 10), however, include questions that ask students to reengage cases from previous chapters, though emphasizing analysis and application of content from the new material. The discussion questions use a framework of three different levels of questions designed to engage different case vignettes—facts, analysis, and action. Factual questions promote rote, recall, and comprehension as students will need to draw upon specific content in the chapters to answer the questions. Analysis questions promote inductive and deductive thinking as students will need to breakdown and reorganize content, apply the content in different settings, and incorporate material from different sources beyond the text. Action questions promote synthesis and evaluation of material as students will need to develop pathways of action as if they were the social workers in each case. Analysis and action questions usually have no single right answer.

<A>Content of the Book

The chapters are organized into three sections. What follows are a few paragraphs describing the primary themes and a synopsis of the chapters within each part. The summary is intended as a guide for you to help your students understand how the chapters fit within each section and the book as a whole.

<B>Part One: What is social work and what do social workers do?

The initial chapters set the context for developing a foundation for competent social work practice. A solid foundation begins with examining the key elements that define the professional endeavor of social work. Social work is such a broad and dynamic field making it difficult for scholars to agree on a single definition. Chapter two provides a summary of how social work has been defined in the past. We then give our definition and use the remainder of the chapter to provide an in-depth explanation of each component.

Chapters three and chapter four transitions from defining social work to describing competent social work practice. Equipped with a comprehensive working description of social work, students are then ready to think about what social workers are capable of doing. Chapter three gives students an overview of competence-based learning as opposed to content-based learning. We examine the political, evaluative, and scientific/research based influences that brought about competence-based learning for social work. We then introduce the *“Why we do/What we do”* conceptual framework to help students grasp the competencies of social work for practical learning and application. Social work is a profession where our professional identity (*Why we do)* always informs the method of our practice (*What we do).* The first group of competencies emphasizes professional identity; the last group emphasizes the method of practice. The rest of chapter three provides an overview of the competencies and subsequent practice behaviors that inform our professional identity. Chapter four provides an overview of the competencies and subsequent practice behaviors that describe the primary method of social work. Every chapter in part one includes case vignettes. The case vignettes present students with examples of different core competencies in action. The discussion questions at the end of the chapters give students an opportunity to reflect on how the competencies are applied. The questions will also ask students to think about ways in which other competencies and practice behaviors may be used by the different social workers described in the cases.

<B>Part Two: The professional identity of social workers

Part two is where an introduction to competence-based social work differs from the content-focus of other textbooks. Whereas many introductory texts present students with a wide spectrum of information for rote and recall learning of material, the emphasis in this book shifts to helping students use the material to begin developing their professional identities. The seven chapters in part two provide in-depth content and multiple opportunities for application, analysis, and synthesis of the competencies that contribute to the distinctive professional identities of social workers.

Chapters five and six work together to prepare students for the personal and professional reflection needed for social work. The initial chapter calls students’ attention to the importance of self-awareness. Students will explore how their personal experiences, motivations, and values may influence how they interpret what they learn. They will also examine how their personal experiences can influence how they eventually practice as social workers. A main theme of the chapter involves helping students understand the on-going cycle of personal and professional assessment needed for competent social work.

The following chapter familiarizes students with the four primary ways social workers develop their professional identities. The educational preparation, level of credentials and licenses, membership and participation in professional organizations, and accumulated experiences are the key elements contributing to the professional identity of social workers. Case vignettes in chapter five and subsequent discussion questions assist students in personal self-reflection and assessment of their own professional aspirations.

The characteristics contributing to the identity and methods of social work emerge from the history of the profession. Chapter seven examines the history of social work from the perspective of helping students connect what they are studying and doing with the significant developments of social welfare from the past. A primary emphasis focuses on preparing students to understand the external challenges and internal tensions unique to social work. Our purpose or mission (*Why we do)* often places social work in difficult positions that sometimes lead to critiques of the profession. As they read and discuss the content from the chapter, students will learn to recognize, embrace, and learn from the challenges and tensions. On one hand, the critiques and challenges represent opportunities to learn and adapt to current conditions. On the other hand, critiques and challenges give social workers opportunities to re-articulate who we are and what we do for ourselves and the broader society.

Building upon the material from chapter seven, chapter eight explores the historical set of values and ethics unifying social work practice. The main themes of the chapter include, viewing the values as universal principles that make social work such a dynamic international profession, continuing to reflect upon the relationship between personal and professional values, learning and applying the Code of Ethics from the National Association of Social Workers (and, as applicable, the Code of Ethics from the Canadian Association of Social Workers, the British Association of Social Workers, the Japanese Association of Social Work, the International Federation of Social Workers, and Codes of Ethics promulgated by other distinguished associations of social work), and tolerating the complexity and ambiguity often inherent in ethical social work practice. A section describing a few models of ethical reasoning includes two new case vignettes. The end of the chapter includes additional cases for students to apply the models and continue reflecting upon the intersection of their personal values and the professional values of social work.

The next three chapters delve deeper into important professional values of social work. Advancing human rights, advocating for social and economic justice, and appreciating diversity and differences in practice underlie the core of what social workers value and do. The values are so important to social work that students have to do more than learn what they mean. Students have to develop and demonstrate competence incorporating these values in all they do as social workers. Along with the content of the chapters, additional cases are included that emphasize advancing social justice and engaging diversity at the various levels of practice. The combination of serving people at different levels of practice while advancing human rights and engaging diversity means that competent social workers must appraise and integrate multiple sources of knowledge. Social workers draw upon logic, scientific inquiry, creativity, and curiosity to make sound judgments in practice. They then have to discern how to convert those judgments into effective actions. Chapter twelve examines the significant role of critical thinking in social work. We introduce students to the steps of evidence-based practice, a primary method for using critical thinking skills to make informed practice decisions. Showing students how to critically appraise sources of information is also a primary emphasis of the chapter. Additional cases with questions give students a chance to engage in critical thinking.

<A>Part Three: Method of practice and where we work

The last two chapters prepare students for what is ahead. Students in social work will likely take courses that focus on research in practice, human behavior theory and development, the role of policy in practice, the contexts of practice, and specific practices with different populations. Students may also take specific courses focusing on advancing human rights, advocating for social justice, or diversity in practice. These and other courses will continue to help students develop their professional identities, “*Why we do*,” while emphasizing the methods of social work, “*What we do*.” Chapter thirteen provides students with an initial look at the generalist practice method—the foundation of social work practice. We introduce students to the core operational practice behaviors of engaging, assessing, intervening, and evaluating. We emphasize applying the method at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. We also demonstrate how the steps of EBP are consistent with generalist practice. The chapter concludes with the last cases in the book.

The final chapter encourages students to think about what they could be doing someday as competent social workers. We describe some of the fields and settings where social workers practice. Pursuing a career in social work is an exciting and rewarding endeavor. We believe it is important for students to kindle their passion to serve others as they engage in the rigorous coursework ahead of them. Our hope is that students will allow themselves to envision working with different populations, in various fields and settings, making a difference in the lives of people they serve.

<A>Additional Resources to Support Student Learning

Students often benefit from learning information through different methods. The text includes access to [URL TO COME], which provides two additional ways of engaging the material. Students can review PowerPoint slides providing a summary of the key points from each chapter. We also include a series of 10-15 minute mini-podcast lecture files. Students can listen to the files with their computers. They can also upload the files to their phones and other mobile electronic devices to listen to the material at their convenience. Students can use the slides and the mini-podcast lectures separately or together. We recommend that students use the resources to supplement and reinforce their learning. An effective strategy incorporates reading a chapter, then listening to the mini-podcast lectures while looking at the slides. Students can then come to class prepared to learn and discuss the material with their peers and you.

<A> Acknowledgements and Onward

We are extremely grateful and want you to know that our students and student assistants were instrumental in the development of this book. They gave us feedback along the way and acted as sounding boards for our text from a student perspective. They also have allowed us to refine techniques and strategies for the text and its supplemental materials. We hope that you and your students find this book and its approach as helpful as we have as you engage them in discovery of our noble profession!

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