

**The Teaching of Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work Higher Education:
Living by the Charlie Parker Dictum**

Response to Papers by:
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and
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*“If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.”
~ Charlie Parker, legendary jazz musician*

Introduction

Evidence-based practice (EBP) has been intensely discussed and debated over the past decade in social work (cf. Gambrill, 2006a ; Gibbs & Gambrill, 2002; Gray, 1997; Roberts & Yeager, 2004; Sackett et al., 1997). This symposium on improving the teaching of evidence-based practice in social work, spearheaded by Dr. Allen Rubin of The University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work, will no doubt serve to move the dialogue forward.

In their papers prepared for the symposium, my colleagues - Aron Shlonsky and Susan Stern (2006) and Haluk Soydan (2006) - have provided me with ample material with which to respond. Despite my temptation to respond to the many important points made in each paper, I shall focus on what I consider to be the five critical issues and themes that cut across both manuscripts.

As I respond to these five themes, I will also raise some questions on the teaching of evidence-based practice (EBP) that linger for me, and I would suggest, for social work higher education as a collective whole. In some instances, I will propose what I consider to be plausible solutions to these questions. In other instances, for me to propose even tentative solutions to the participants of this symposium would be like me telling Charlie Parker how I play the saxophone. (I shall return to Parker later in the paper, as his wisdom might prove to be a useful compass.) In other words, for some issues, perhaps the most I can meaningfully contribute is to simply amplify the challenges that we face and to underscore key questions that have been raised by my colleagues.

Response to Key Points Made by (1) Shlonsky & Stern and (2) Soydan

I’d like to begin by complimenting my colleagues on effectively capturing and articulating many of the issues that social work educators face in the teaching of evidence-based practice. If anything, my challenge in formulating my response was to boil my comments down to a few main key points, all of which seem to me to be intrinsically intertwined.

Wrestling EBP to the Ground

First, both papers astutely provide a definition of evidence-based practice (EBP). Indeed, the importance of wrestling a definition of EBP to the ground must be underscored. Both papers are grounded, at least initially, in Sackett et al.’s (1997) original definition of EBP, which is “the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients” (p. 71). However, my colleagues go beyond this definition, and recognize that EBP involves integrating clinical expertise, client values, and the best available research evidence (Haynes, Devereaux, & Guyatt, 2002; Mullen & Streiner, 2004; Sackett et al., 2000; Thyer, 2004).

I think that my colleagues are correct in suggesting that the field of social work is far from agreement about the meaning of EBP or its usefulness in practice. Shlonsky and Gibbs (2004) have asserted that EBP “is in danger of becoming a catchphrase for anything that is done with clients that can somehow be linked to an empirical study, regardless of the study’s quality, competing evidence, or consideration of clients’ needs” (p. 137).

This sentiment is supported, in part, by recent findings from a national online survey of 973 social work faculty (Rubin & Parrish, in press). This study found that most respondents (73%) held a favorable view toward EBP, yet demonstrated much disparity in their definition of EBP and views regarding the EBP research hierarchy. In this national survey, respondents were asked to check all that apply regarding which of the following definitions were consistent with their definition of EBP: (1) “It is a process that includes locating and appraising credible evidence as a part of practice decisions;” or (2) “It is a way to designate certain interventions as empirically supported under certain conditions.” They were also provided response options of “other” or “not sure.” Approximately the same proportion of respondents endorsed both definitions as endorsed only one of the two definitions (46.2% compared to 47%, respectively).

Based on these findings, it seems that Shlonsky and Stern (2006) and Soydan (2006) were wise in recognizing the somewhat urgent need for the field to reach consensus on a definition of EBP that respects the evidentiary research hierarchy, and at the same time, embraces the sophisticated and complex nature of the EBP process.

I have a suggestion that, if implemented, may hold some potential to nudge us forward in this regard. I shall return to this important issue, and provide my recommendation, later in my concluding comments.

Modeling the Complexity of EBP in our Teaching

The second common thread across both papers that I wish to highlight, then, is that evidence-based practice is indeed complex, and thus, the teaching of evidence-based practice is inherently messy and fraught with challenges.

Shlonsky and Stern provide some rather concrete pedagogical recommendations around the effective teaching of evidence-based practice. These appear useful, and I will no doubt adopt many of their ideas and techniques into my own teaching. Eileen Gambrill (2006b), one of the symposium panelists, has also written extensively on the use of critical thinking in social work. To sum this issue up in one parsimonious statement, I agree with Haynes et al. (2002) that EBP “is a guide for thinking about how decisions should be made” (p. 36).

I know from my own experience that I am often humbled in my attempts to teach EBP to students. In a few years, in all likelihood, students will have forgotten whatever “pearls of wisdom” I was able to muster. So, in many respects, the process that I model and facilitate in class seems just as important, if not more important, than the content of my responses to student questions. To name just a few elements, this process may include some of the following: modeling and encouraging transparency and honesty in decision-making; using critical thinking and appraisal; implementing an active learning pedagogy; the use of Socratic questioning; the challenging of assumptions; and the application of knowledge to practice and policy decisions (cf. Gambrill, 2006a; 2006b).

The effective teaching of evidence-based practice certainly warrants further examination by social work educators. In the meantime, questions that remain uppermost in my mind include: What are the most effective pedagogical methods for teaching evidence-based practice?; Are we nearly as good as we think we are at teaching EBP?; Based on what evidence? Would it be useful to provide in-service trainings through “centers for teaching effectiveness” for faculty on the art and science of effective teaching?

As a partial response to questions such as this, I think that we need to do a much better job of preparing doctoral students to teach evidence-based practice. This can be accomplished, in part, through requiring doctoral students to take a course on pedagogy, by setting up teaching mentoring programs where students are paired with faculty, and by giving them opportunities to teach before they graduate. I’d like to suggest that this point also holds true for those of us in tenured/tenure-track faculty positions. Even for those professors who are masterful teachers, there is always room for enhancing teaching skills and approaches.

Social work faculty attend the IASWR-sponsored pre-SSWR conference technical assistance institutes to learn about the research priorities and mechanisms for applications from major national research entities. This is important, as social work faculty need to be more competitive in our attempts to secure federal and foundation funding. While this emphasis on research is critical - we need sound research to inform our evidence-based teaching – it does not need to preclude an emphasis on effective teaching of evidence-based practice. The two go hand-in-glove.

Yet, as an academic guild, I do not see us placing the same emphasis on training for enhancing teaching effectiveness. In some respects, the importance of being awarded tenure at research intensive universities forces faculty to prioritize research over teaching. Rather than simply accept “good enough teaching,” I’d like to suggest that we aim for (and reward) excellence in teaching. This can be accomplished in multiple ways, including, but not limited to, matching faculty teaching assignments with their strengths in teaching, providing regular in-serving trainings for faculty on effective teaching, and recognizing excellence in teaching through teaching awards and corresponding raises in salary.

It is important to note here that the number of non-tenured faculty teaching in social work programs has increased three-fold in the past 15 years, resulting in the almost equal use of non-tenured track and tenure-track faculty in social work education programs (Noble, 2000). It stands to reason then that in talking about the teaching of evidence-based practice, the discussion is incomplete if we do not examine how to support adjunct faculty in their efforts to teach evidence-based practice. I also suggest that we view adjunct faculty as an important asset in our efforts to teach evidence-based practice.

Fagan-Wilen, Springer, Ambrosino, and White (2006) have written about their collective efforts in supporting the adjunct faculty at The University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work, with a major emphasis being the teaching of evidence-based practice. Three of these key efforts are highlighted below.

First, a part-time adjunct faculty liaison was hired. The adjunct faculty liaison position was created with several mandates, including the following: provide assistance to new adjunct hires with course development, syllabus preparation, and classroom

resources; provide a “one-stop” point of information and support for adjunct faculty; create a training and development infrastructure for adjuncts, utilizing expert campus teaching specialists; and finally, facilitate collaboration between tenure-track and adjunct faculty teaching different sections of the same course. This last mandate, to connect tenure-track faculty with adjunct faculty, has proven to benefit both parties. I know that I have personally learned as much from our School’s adjunct faculty, if not more, than they have learned from me.

Second, an emphasis has been placed on information sharing. This has included informing adjunct faculty of evidence-based research presentations on campus that have relevance to their course topic or area of interest, which could in turn be integrated into a teaching module. Another aspect of information sharing has had to do with access to recent and relevant evidence-based research to better inform classroom teaching. The adjunct faculty liaison worked collaboratively with tenure-track faculty to develop an “Evidence-Based Resource Center” that is housed in the adjunct faculty office. All adjunct faculty are invited to review and use these resources.

Third, a concerted effort has been made to increase the collaboration between adjunct faculty and tenure-track faculty. This often takes the form of the associate dean for academic affairs or the adjunct faculty liaison contacting tenure-track faculty by phone to ask them to work with a specific adjunct faculty around course development and preparation. To the extent that tenure-track faculty and adjunct faculty can team up and collaborate, this should help to overcome the cultural divide by academicians and practitioners. If an objective of EBP is to translate research to practice in meaningful ways, such efforts seem worthwhile.

Social work programs must support their doctoral students, adjunct faculty, and tenure-track faculty in the teaching of evidence-based practice. This is no short order. Yet one final question remains for me related to the teaching of EBP, one that is perhaps even broader in scope than those posed above: How can social work curricula be reformulated and adapted to cultivate the effective teaching of EBP?

Social Work Curriculum

This last question brings me to the third common thread across the two papers. Soydan asserts that social work curricula have to be reformulated and adapted to embrace the culture of evidence-based practice, and emphasizes the need for course materials and tutorials that support more efficient teaching. Shlonsky and Stern also make reference to this when they suggest using a basic EBP assignment template to facilitate linkage between classes. Recognizing the possibility that students will double- or triple-dip into their assignments across courses before they matriculate, Shlonsky and Stern even suggest monitoring student assignments (e.g., by creating a school-wide searchable registry of titles and abstract, or requiring students to turn in copies of papers for related classes). To the extent that such coordination across classes, and perhaps more systematically across the MSW curriculum (i.e., horizontal integration), is achieved, it is more likely that students will perceive classes as building upon one another. Any faculty member that has survived an effort to revamp its program curriculum toward horizontal integration knows all too well that this takes sustained effort and resources, and perhaps, a shift in culture.

Field education is a sticky-wicket when discussing a true shift in the culture of social work education, simply because there are so many moving parts. Shlonsky and Stern correctly assert that one of the objections to EBP is that the approach is untenable due to time constraints once social workers are employed full-time. So, to prepare our students as professional social workers, how do we best connect what we teach in the class and what happens in field?

Ironically, the complexity of directing a field education program mirrors the complexity of EBP. Here I will no doubt raise more questions than provide solutions. Is it reasonable to require all of our field placement agencies to commit to EBP? (I think I could comfortably argue that this is not a tenable solution for most social work programs, particularly those in rural communities.) If not, what are the ripple effects when what is being taught in the classroom (EBP) does not reflect what is taking place in field? (I refer the reader back here to my earlier comments on the importance of modeling the process of EBP in the classroom as students struggle with this disconnect.) One plausible and modest suggestion, which we have implemented at The University of Texas at Austin, is to provide a mandatory training on EBP to all field instructors. The purpose of this training goes beyond dispelling myths about EBP and describing the EBP process. The hope is that we might begin to shift the culture so that field instructors will, at a minimum, not create obstacles but rather allow students to explore evidence-based practice and policy in their field placement.

Indeed, given entrenched organizational patterns or myths fostered in some field placement settings, this is a formidable obstacle to overcome. This obstacle also brings with it an opportunity.

Support from and Coordination among Social Work Professional Organizations

The fourth common thread that I wish to amplify is nicely articulated by Soydan, who reminds us that maintaining old organizational patterns or myths, such as teaching interventions that lack high standards of evidence, is natural and common place in the academic guild (and in agency settings). Accordingly, Soydan proposes that we strategically exert the forces of extra-institutional sources to move educational institutions and professional agencies beyond opinion-based social work. Soydan identifies various extra-institutional sources that can potentially contribute to the diffusion and adoption of evidence-based practice in social work, including clients, organizations, government agencies, and professional organizations. I turn my attention here to the latter of these.

The Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) and the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR) have contributed greatly to the advancement of research training for students and the support of faculty engaged in research. Perhaps most importantly, SSWR and IASWR have played a key role in shifting the culture by promoting the development, testing, and dissemination of evidence-based-practice in social work (cf. Zlotnik & Solt, 2006).

The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2001) promote the inclusion of empirically based interventions in practice content and the provision of research content that prepares students to develop and implement evidence-based interventions. It is important to note that EPAS allows for the development and implementation of more flexible core

curricula. Foundation course work is still required, but MSW programs, for example, are no longer bound by the requirement of offering a foundation year. This allows MSW programs to move advanced course content up earlier in the curriculum (e.g., into the spring semester of the first year for a two-year program of study). Such increased flexibility just may allow some programs the wiggle room needed to better integrate evidence-based practice into the curriculum. One prestigious social work program – the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University - has made EBP the guiding framework for its entire curriculum (Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003), and the University of Toronto provides all students with an introductory EBP course (Shlonsky & Stern, 2006).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2005) states that evidence-based practice is consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics. I believe that social work educators can do a better job of coordinating our efforts with NASW, and perhaps starting at the local and state chapters is one feasible way to gain some momentum. As an illustration, there are approximately 40 social work programs in the state of Texas, and the deans and directors of these programs belong to a group called the Texas Association of Social Work Deans and Directors (TASWDD). Representatives from TASWDD recently met with the Executive Director of NASW-Texas, and the outcome of this meeting was two-fold: a stronger partnership between TASWDD and NASW-Texas, and the potential for the two groups to coordinate efforts in an attempt to impact workforce development. In other words, rather than Texas social work programs and NASW-Texas operating in silos, the hope is that we can collaborate to better prepare social work professionals.

It is not enough to discuss evidence-based practice within the confines of our ivory towers. It seems critical to me that we partner with key stakeholders representing and working in our communities to address some of the muddier issues (e.g., preparing social workers for practice in rural communities) facing the social work profession and the development of its workforce. As one exemplar, the Humanities Institute of The University of Texas at Austin sponsors a Community Sabbatical Program, where leaders of local nonprofit organizations are awarded the opportunity to conduct research relevant to their respective areas of interest. The program awards sums of \$2,500 to \$5,000 to individuals from nonprofits to compensate for work hours lost. It also teams them up with two relevant faculty members. Perhaps replicated, this model could serve as an additional nexus between researchers and practitioners, helping to shift the culture of EBP to local nonprofits. This would carry with it positive ripple effects for students eventually placed in or employed by those agencies.

Living by the Charlie Parker Dictum

Finally, my colleagues are equally strong in their assertion that a culture shift is needed, and I have alluded to this repeatedly in earlier sections of the paper. Soydan (2006) suggests that a cultural shift is required as a prerequisite for moving from opinion-based to evidence-based social work practice, and this sentiment is certainly echoed by Shlonsky and Stern (2006) when they promote a culture of critical inquiry in the classroom.

To experience a shift in culture within social work higher education, practice, and research, Soydan writes that “it is time to drop the dichotomous language

[quantitative/qualitative] and recognize that all research designs are good for the types of scientific questions for which they are tailored” (p. 5). For example, if the question pertains to verifying a cause and effect relationship between an intervention and an outcome, then well controlled experimental studies (such as RCTs) or meta-analyses belong at the top of the hierarchy; whereas, if the question is how best to use research as a tool to empower disadvantaged or oppressed groups, then participatory action research (PAR) belongs at the top of the hierarchy (Rubin & Babbie, 2005).

In other words, according to the evidentiary research hierarchy, all research has its place in helping social workers more effectively alleviate critical social problems and promote social and economic justice for disenfranchised populations. I enjoy a robust epistemological debate as much as the next academician, and I am aware that this response paper is filtered through my own epistemological lens. But, it is time for us to rise above our relativistic (“all ways of knowing are equally valid regardless of the question being asked”) and dichotomous (“EBP is either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for social work”) epistemological rumblings. A shift in culture is needed.

This brings us full circle to words of wisdom spoken by Charlie Parker, words that today are affectionately referred to as the Parker Dictum: *If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn* (Ford, 2006). Most social work faculty [73% according to the Rubin and Parrish (in press) survey] express a favorable view toward EBP, yet we continue to be bogged down in epistemological debates that are too often grounded in erroneous assumptions and misunderstandings about EBP. Some of the more common misunderstandings of EBP – for example, that it ignores client values and preferences, promotes a “cookbook” approach, is simply a cost-cutting tool, leads to therapeutic nihilism, and so on - have been addressed in the literature (cf. Straus & McAlister, 2000) and these criticisms have been addressed by subsequent reviewers (cf. Gambrill, 2003; Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Sackett et al., 2000).

I am not asserting, nor are proponents of the approach, that EBP is without limitations. EBP is neither “all good” nor “all bad,” but it does hold potential for guiding social workers in delivering effective services. With this caveat, I’d like to suggest that if we in the academic guild don’t live it (evidence-based practice), it won’t come out of our horn (teaching). And if it doesn’t come out of our horn, we can’t expect the students matriculating from our programs to engage in EBP.

Conclusion

You may recall that the first theme addressed in my response had to do with the importance of wrestling EBP to the ground by agreeing upon a definition of EBP, and that I promised to provide a recommendation about how to potentially nudge us forward in reaching some consensus on this issue. In 1991, the National Institute of Mental Health provided support for the social work profession to create the Task Force on Social Work Research, which was spearheaded by Dr. David Austin. It seems critical to me that if we are to improve the effectiveness of how social work programs teach evidence-based practice, that we must first reach some working definition of EBP to drive our curriculum development and pedagogy. To date, this effort has been somewhat fragmented, with individual scholars weighing in on the debate here and there over the past decade.

So, I am left wondering if a more formal, coordinated effort – through a Blue Ribbon Task Force on the Teaching of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) – would prove

useful. Perhaps this Task Force on the Teaching of EBP could be coordinated through one of our professional organizations (SSWR, IASWR, CSWE, or NASW). This is by no means thought to be a panacea. However, it may serve two useful purposes: (1) to continue the momentum gained through this important symposium in a sustained effort; and (2) to ultimately provide social work educators with a clear definition and explanation of EBP, that, in turn, will inform the role of EBP in social work and the effective teaching of EBP.

The members of such a task force may want to consider the sage advice of Robert Duke (2005), a university distinguished teaching professor and director of the center for music learning at UT-Austin who taught a university-wide doctoral course on pedagogy for a number of years:

Thinking about teaching and learning will ultimately lead to decisions about how to teach, but to skip right to the how-to-teach part without spending considerable time on the thinking part is a big mistake, one that inevitably leads to the kind of unenviable situation in which the discipline of teaching often finds itself: hurtling from one “new thing” to another, with little careful thought and critical reflection, becoming mired in contentious arguments over abstractions about which there are little data, arguments that are quite removed from the realities of colleges and schools, arguments that seldom bear fruit (p. vii).

Such a coordinated effort, or something similar, may serve to provide a sustained and constructive move forward that will build upon this symposium. In the way that the Task Force on Social Work Research was instrumental in shifting the culture of social work research, I am hopeful that a Task Force on the Teaching of Evidence-Based Practice will be instrumental in shifting the culture of social work higher education. Perhaps, in time, such a shift in culture will embolden the spirit of the Parker Dictum in the affirmative – *if you live it, it will come out of your horn* – so that this spirit will blow its way into social work higher education and into the teaching of evidence-based practice and policy.

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