

## Using Internet-Based Videos as Pedagogical Tools in the Social Work Policy Classroom

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**Abstract:** *Students often feel disconnected from their introductory social welfare policy courses. Therefore, it is important that instructors employ engaging pedagogical methods in the classroom. A review of the literature reveals that a host of methods have been utilized to attempt to interest students in policy courses, but there is no mention of using internet-based videos in the social welfare policy classroom. This article describes how to select and use appropriate internet-based videos from websites such as YouTube and SnagFilms, to effectively engage students in social welfare policy courses. Four rules are offered for choosing videos based on emotional impact, brevity, and relevance to course topics. The selected videos should elicit students' passions and stimulate critical thinking when used in concert with instructor-generated discussion questions, writing assignments, and small group dialogue. Examples of the process of choosing videos, discussion questions, and student reactions to the use of videos are provided.*

**Keywords:** *Internet-based videos, pedagogical methods, social welfare policy*

Social work policy introduction courses are replete with facts about the founders of the profession, historical policy initiatives, and historical truths students have likely never heard before. More importantly, social work policy introduction courses may be the first time young students are asked to think critically about their own values and beliefs. However, policy courses are, at best, unpopular and are generally viewed by students as mandated torture (Anderson & Harris, 2005; Morris, 2000; Wolk, Pray, Weismiller, & Dempsey, 1996). Some students even view policy courses as irrelevant and outside the sphere of their practice interests (Gordon, 1994). It is because students perceive policy courses as unimportant and because the courses introduce so much new information to students that instructors must strive to ensure that the courses are palatable, and even interesting. This article briefly explores the literature pertaining to theories and methodologies that have been put forth for teaching social work policy courses. Additionally, literature that identifies the use of internet videos in the classroom is explored. Finally, a discussion of the use of easily-obtained internet videos is presented as an innovative pedagogical method that can help students become more involved in the social work policy classroom.

### WHY IS SOCIAL WORK POLICY EDUCATION IMPORTANT?

Introductory social work policy courses are, in essence, history courses that require students to learn significant dates, biographies of important people, influential policies, major historical events, competing political ideologies, and new terminology. It is the instructor's job to tie those seemingly outdated pieces of information together and to

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make them relevant to today's social work students. It is those students who will soon be relied upon by the profession to utilize their critical thinking skills to advocate for social justice via socio-political change and new, more wide-reaching social welfare policies. For these reasons and others, social welfare policy courses are fundamentally important to professional social work education (Sundet & Kelly, 2002). If tomorrow's advocates for change are uninformed or are simply uninterested in historical and current policy, social work may again be relegated to an ineffective, under-informed, generic helping profession (Reamer, 1993). Further, by ensuring that social work students have an effective and thorough education in the history of social welfare policy, the social work profession has the potential to become as influential as it was during the late 1800s, the early 1900s, and the 1960s, due to its numerous radical members who were tireless in their advocacy efforts (Reamer, 1993). Thus, the effort to help students find current and relevant applications for their policy education continues (Sundet & Kelly, 2002).

Further underscoring the importance of student engagement in social welfare policy courses is the relatively recent Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) mandate put forth by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2008). With EPAS, the CSWE "introduces the notion of requisite student competencies comprised of interrelated practice behaviors" upon which subsequent course curricula must be based (Holloway, Black, Hoffman, & Pierce, 2009, p. 1). With ten core competencies, CSWE has standardized the areas in which students must demonstrate proficiency in their courses. Additionally, students can be evaluated based upon their mastery of the core competency areas relevant to each course including social welfare policy courses. Under the EPAS mandates, there is freedom to develop new teaching approaches that can help students demonstrate competence in the mandated areas.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: SOCIAL WORK POLICY TEACHING METHODS AND INTERNET-BASED VIDEO TEACHING METHODS**

Numerous methodologies and theories for effectively teaching social work policy courses have been described in the literature, whether the courses are introductory social welfare policy courses or more advanced policy analysis courses. A brief discussion of various teaching methodologies is offered here.

One theory is that social welfare policy should not be relegated to separate courses but should, instead, be infused in each course across the curriculum. In this "experience-based" method, students complete specifically outlined value-, theory-, skills-, policy-, and research-based assignments and synthesize those assignments with a series of practice tasks across the curriculum (Gibbons & Gray, 2005). A different method, explained by O'Connor and Netting (2008), involves teaching policy courses as though they are research courses. The authors point out that researchers utilize specific statistical analyses that are apropos to their projects, not one type of analysis for each project. They suggest that when students are seeking to complete a policy analysis, they should choose frameworks based on the specific policies they are analyzing, rather than relying upon a generic framework.

Wolfer and Gray (2007) offer another method for teaching social work policy courses called the "decision case method." Students are asked to thoroughly review and analyze actual cases, which build on their analytic, political, interactional, and value-clarifying skills. Social work policy has also been taught utilizing legislative policy briefs (Sundet & Kelly, 2002). In this method, course instructors meet with members of the state legislature before the semester begins to generate a list of impending policy initiatives that will be discussed by the legislature. The instructors then present the list of upcoming policy issues to their students who author thoroughly-researched policy briefs that are utilized by members of the legislature to make decisions on policy initiatives. Another method, the task force approach, takes into consideration that, just as social workers often form groups to solve problems, task forces are formed to "investigate problems, recommend solutions, and sometimes carry out immediate action" (Johnson, 1994, p. 336). Johnson (1994) notes that students who experience the task force policy teaching method may be able to more effectively and adeptly utilize those sorts of task force group experiences in different areas of their professional lives.

Service learning and policy-integrated practica are two policy teaching methods that have been utilized and compared by Anderson and Harris (2005). A service learning policy course immerses students in actual community issues and problems while policy-integrated practica help students understand "the ways in which policy informs practice and practice informs policy" (Anderson & Harris, 2005, p. 516). When these two teaching methods were compared, Anderson and Harris (2005) found that if students have experiential involvement with policy, whether through service learning or policy-infused practica, they are equally as likely to understand and correctly apply policy theories.

Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) are short, evaluative, non-graded, anonymous formative evaluations that students complete throughout the semester to help their instructors assess whether or not they understand and can apply the concepts that are being taught. Adams (2004) describes several CATs that can be utilized in the social work policy classroom to ensure that key concepts have been absorbed by students. For example, the Knowledge Probe CAT can be utilized to ask students whether or not they have ever heard of a particular person, legislative act, or program, as well as the extent to which the concepts are known to students. Additionally, according to Keller, Whittaker, and Burke (2001), debate is an effective teaching method that can be utilized in the social work policy classroom. For debate assignments, students are assigned controversial policy issues and are asked to use critical thinking skills in their research and reporting of both sides of the issue.

Most innovative approaches to teaching social welfare policy involve widely utilized pedagogical tools such as debate and small group work. One approach, however, stands out. Shdaimah (2009) utilizes multimedia, in the form of documentary films, to help students understand the viewpoints of real people who are coping with the effects of social policies. Shdaimah (2009) suggests that students become emotionally involved with the subjects of documentary films and states that that involvement promotes a deeper level of engagement in class discussions. Shdaimah (2009) contends that students may be able to enter the social work profession with a clearer understanding of social

policies if they have the benefit of being able to process the multifaceted complications of real peoples' lives presented in documentary films within the relative safety of the social work classroom.

Each of these original teaching methods seeks to engage students in social work policy courses. Many of the methods attempt to pique students' interest by engaging them in active learning exercises like policy brief preparation and community-based assignments. However, while videos and films are often used to teach students in other disciplines (for example, see Everhart, 2009 and Mullen & Wedwick, 2008), only one method could be found in the literature (Shdaimah, 2009) that described the use of films to teach a social policy course. Through films, students can experience powerful visual and audio stimuli in concert. These stimuli connect students to their emotions in a way that a single photograph or a lone sound byte cannot. Instead of merely viewing a photograph and reading the accompanying text or listening to a podcast, through films students are given the opportunity to connect with people who are living with and struggling through the policies they are studying. Thus, when instructors are seeking a way to involve students emotionally in social welfare policy, multimedia in the form of films, documentaries, and other videos can be effective and engaging.

Today's students have, by and large, become technologically savvy. *Google* has become a verb overheard frequently in student conversations, and everyone on campus knows what a *wiki* is. YouTube is a perennial favorite of students where video clips, movies, short films, documentaries, and almost any other form of video can be accessed. There is some discussion in the literature of YouTube and other web-based video sites (e.g., Google Video) being used to teach primary and secondary students (e.g., Everhart, 2009; Pace & Jones, 2009) however, web-based video sites have not been widely discussed as pedagogical tools in the college classroom.

There are multiple widely-used web sites such as YouTube, Google Video, Hulu, and SnagFilms, to name only a few, that allow users to easily search for video clips, short films, full-length films, documentaries, and other types of videos by subject, length, and age (among other criteria). These types of video sites have enabled teachers to engage twenty-first century students in a new way. Mullen and Wedwick (2008) discuss using YouTube in a middle-school classroom, reminding us that students have "grown up digital" (p. 66) and that, by utilizing technology in the classroom, instructors can "close the digital divide between teachers, educational systems, and students" (p. 66). They suggest that students benefit immensely from the content available on YouTube because it provides unlimited information in a distinctly different and engaging format.

Pace and Jones (2009) point out that using YouTube in primary and secondary science classrooms has great benefits for students. They identify that using web-based videos in the classroom helps students become critical thinkers and also helps them integrate newly learned information by catering to their different learning styles. Everhart (2009) also discusses the use of YouTube in the primary science classroom. In his classes, he assesses what students know about upcoming lesson topics and then fills in the knowledge blanks with videos from YouTube. He uses both professional and amateur videos to keep students interested and engaged. Everhart reminds us that it is the

instructor's discussion and questioning that connects the selected videos to the lesson's content, and that without the instructor's insight, the video clips cease to have meaning. Additionally, Trier (2007) points out that YouTube can be used to find video clips to help with literary interpretations in the graduate school classroom. YouTube has also been proposed as an effective teaching method for colleges of nursing and other healthcare professions (Skiba, 2007).

### **TEACHING AN INTRODUCTORY SOCIAL WORK POLICY COURSE WITH INTERNET-BASED VIDEOS**

In order to make social work policy relevant to undergraduates in an introductory course, YouTube and other internet-based videos can be integrated into the course, especially because many of today's college students are, as suggested by Skiba (2007) "digital natives who grew up in a multimedia world and are most comfortable with technology" (p. 100). The history of social work policy is exciting and has, in large part, shaped the way the profession operates today. It is, therefore, imperative that social work students learn about our social welfare policy past and how policy is created along with their other, perhaps more appealing, social work practice courses. In order to expose these students, many of whom are "digital natives," to historical and contemporary aspects of the development of social welfare policies, relevant web-based videos can be incorporated effectively into an introductory social welfare policy course. The following rules and suggestions for integrating web-based videos into the social welfare policy classroom were developed through the author's experience teaching an introductory social welfare policy course.

#### **Choosing Effective Internet-based Videos**

To successfully discover appropriate web-based videos to integrate into social welfare policy courses, instructors should use their course syllabi, textbooks, and assigned readings to identify important areas of instruction and, accordingly, identify key terms to search for useful video websites. Sometimes, appropriate videos are easily located, but other times the correct videos may be elusive. It may take several hours of searching different websites and often dozens of videos have to be previewed in order to find the best one. There are, however, useful tools provided by websites such as Google (e.g., the Advanced Search option) and YouTube that provide succinct lists of videos in a much shorter amount of time.

Choosing the most effective internet-based video for each lesson is not as difficult as it may seem at first. Though it can be daunting when several thousand "hits" for a given search term appear, most video websites list search results in order of relevance to the search term. Often, refining the search term to be more precise can help when videos being previewed seem unrelated to the lesson. The first rule is that it is important for the instructor to keep in mind that appropriate key words that relate to the topic being taught must be used as search terms. Instructors should use fewer words as key search terms to begin a video search. For example, if the lesson calls for a video that will help students discover and understand the origins of the orphan trains of the 1800s, instead of using *Charles Loring Brace, orphan train program founder*, as the search term start simply

with *orphan trains*. Search terms can always be expanded by adding more words in order to narrow the search. The second rule is that videos should be short. As a rule of thumb, anything over twenty minutes is too long. Most students are used to short, highly-edited multimedia products, and showing clips over twenty minutes long may lead to students becoming distracted or bored. Instructors should keep in mind that the video is a means to helping students think critically and should not take up too much of the class time. If too much time is taken up viewing videos, students will have less time to demonstrate their mastery of the course's core competencies.

The third rule is that each video must be emotionally-charged. The more visceral the reaction the instructor has while previewing the video, the more emotionally engaged the students are likely to be when they view the video. Videos do not have to be cutting-edge or sleekly edited to qualify, but they must be poignant or controversial, or they must introduce topics new to the students and about which they have little information. The fourth rule is that students should know why they are watching the videos. Instructors should provide a brief introduction to each video and identify key ideas for students to keep in mind and/or questions that they must answer as they view the videos. Additionally, it is important for instructors to generate several discussion questions that require students to confront and question their values and to think critically about the topic presented in the video. For these reasons, the instructor should always keep in mind that the videos are a means to an end.

To illustrate how provocative, informative, and interesting internet-based videos have been found and utilized to promote critical thinking, discussion, and learning in the social work policy classroom, three examples of videos used in an introductory policy course taught by this author in the Fall 2010 semester at the University of Kentucky are described below.

### **Utilizing Internet-based Videos Effectively in the Social Work Policy Classroom**

***The death penalty.*** One of the topics typically discussed in the introductory social work policy course is the death penalty. To produce a listing of apropos videos, the term *death penalty* was entered in the YouTube site search engine, and a list of over 5,000 videos was generated. Over a dozen videos were previewed before the most relevant and emotion-producing one was located. In the video documentary, the warden of Central State Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina provides a tour of the prison's execution chamber and delivers an eerily emotionless explanation of a death row prisoner's last hours and of the execution procedure. This ten-minute documentary (Langley, 2007) introduced the death penalty to the class and generated an initial discussion about students' views. The video struck such an emotional chord with the students that it initiated the longest and most intense discussion the class had during the semester. To continue the discussion, a series of questions were developed by the instructor and were addressed in small groups on the heels of the class discussion. The questions asked students to clarify their thoughts and feelings, and each student was assigned one question as a homework writing assignment to help bolster critical thinking skills. Examples of questions students addressed are: 1) *What if the death penalty didn't exist?* 2) *Is it acceptable for social workers to be in favor of the death penalty? Why or why not?* 3) *What do you think about*

*the cause of death on executed prisoners' death certificates being marked as "homicide"? Should they be?*

Because of the video, students were drawn to the topic emotionally and were forced to confront ideas and feelings they had not considered before. After all, since their inception, documentary films have been designed to stimulate not only the intellect, but emotion as well (Rose, 1961). In fact, one student remarked that she had never thought about the death penalty before, much less about the inmates awaiting execution on death row. She came to the next class meeting armed with information about wrongful executions which she shared with the class.

**Immigration.** Immigration policy is another provocative subject that might be addressed in an introductory social welfare policy class. When asked, students in the class seemed generally uninformed and ambivalent about both the history of immigration in the U.S. and current policy debates about immigration. It seemed fitting, therefore, to prod the students into considering issues surrounding immigration and immigration policies during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and to compare them to contemporary immigration issues. In order to facilitate this process with videos, the term *immigration* was entered into the YouTube search engine. After multiple videos were previewed over approximately one hour, a determination was made that none of the videos on the first several pages of the YouTube search results met the learning objectives for the course. Next, the same search term (*immigration*) was entered into the Google Video search engine. A brief perusal of the first page of videos yielded a short (eight minute) and contentious *ABC News This Week* Roundtable discussion on the Arizona immigration law (Amanpour, 2010) featuring Rev. Al Sharpton, George Will, Matthew Dowd, Katrina vanden Heuvel, and Bill Maher. Both conservative and liberal viewpoints are expressed by members of the roundtable in the video clip which allows students to be exposed to both schools of thought.

Next, to meet the other learning objective of the lesson, (i.e., to compare historical and contemporary points of view on immigration), the search term *Ellis Island* was entered in the Google Video search engine. Multiple documentary-type videos and video clips were discovered, and about ninety minutes was spent previewing videos. Finally the decision was made to show students the first half of a show (13 minutes) called *Great Museums: Face of America: The Ellis Island Immigration Museum* (Doyle & Smith, 2002), retrieved from SnagFilms.com. Many times it is not necessary to show entire videos, clips, films, or shows. In the case of the Ellis Island museum video only the first half of the video, which discusses how immigrants came to the U.S., their passage through immigration at Ellis Island, and common immigration concerns of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was apropos to the course.

During class, the immigration video clips were shown back-to-back, and a class discussion ensued. Several students volunteered stories about their visits to Ellis Island and about searching the database there for relatives who had passed through as well as other personal stories. Next, instructor-generated discussion questions were distributed to students in small groups, and they were asked to think about and discuss their answers. Examples of questions used to stimulate discussion are 1) *What are the liberal and*

*conservative views presented in the Roundtable discussion? 2) Are the issues presented in the Roundtable discussion the same as the issues presented in the Ellis Island video that existed in the 1900s? 3) What are the similarities between the situations of Ellis Island immigrants and immigrants today?* In small groups, students felt comfortable relating their own stories, viewpoints, and prejudices about immigrants and, with continued guidance from the instructor; they were able to use their developing critical thinking skills to imagine the immigration experience from others' points of view.

***The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*** An important internationally agreed-upon policy that is introduced in many introductory social work policy courses is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Students in the class reported that they had heard of the UDHR, but they also said they could not remember what it contained. Thus, it became important to expose them to the UDHR in a new and exciting format. With social justice as one of the core components of the social work profession, it is imperative that students understand the basic human rights they and their future clients have. Therefore, instead of simply distributing copies of the UDHR to the class and having a discussion, a search of YouTube for attention-grabbing videos was undertaken with the search term *Universal Declaration of Human Rights history*. The second video yielded by the search, *The Story of Human Rights* (Youth for Human Rights, 2009) met the criteria perfectly. It is a sweeping yet succinct (10 minutes) video that is made for young adults and explains the history and substance of the UDHR. During the class discussion after watching the video, students connected the UDHR to other policies and topics that had been studied during the course of the semester. A debate ensued about whether the low-quality education provided to poor children (e.g., with outdated textbooks in sub-par facilities) still constitutes an education, and students also debated whether or not torture during war can ever be justifiable. Several weeks later, some of the students in the class cited the UDHR during a group assignment on healthcare and stated that they remembered the UDHR because of the video they watched in class.

## DISCUSSION

A brief review of the literature revealed that a wide range of methods are used to teach social welfare policy courses. However, the pedagogical use of internet-based videos in the social work policy classroom has not been widely described. While the use of internet-based videos is not formally evaluated in this article, according to students' anecdotal reports, the method appears to have been beneficial. For example, students had been introduced to the UDHR prior to the course, but reported they could not remember the information until they had viewed the UDHR video retrieved from YouTube. Additionally, students displayed increased critical thinking skills as they engaged in discussion and debate subsequent to viewing internet-based videos on immigration and the death penalty.

The use of internet-based videos in the social work policy classroom could benefit from formal evaluation of its pedagogical utility. Students would be required to demonstrate their understanding of an assigned policy by finding an appropriate internet-based video highlighting that policy. They would also be expected to explicitly identify how their videos demonstrate an understanding of EPAS core competencies identified as

course objectives in their syllabi. Students would utilize internet-based video websites to search for and find an appropriate video that, in some way, whether straightforwardly or creatively, illustrated the importance of their assigned policies. Videos would have to follow the four rules described above. They would need to be engaging, emotionally-charged or controversial, short, and appropriate for classroom viewing. Students would also be required to generate several discussion questions to further highlight salient points about the video and the policy it represented. Students would then be evaluated based on how well the video they chose demonstrated the identified EPAS core competencies.

Social work policy courses seem to have acquired the reputation of being akin to a gulag. It is, therefore, incumbent upon instructors to engage students by utilizing innovative pedagogical tools to excite and inspire them. By bringing reality to the attention of students via films and videos, emotion is injected into the classroom. Film has been described as “one of [the] most intimate and effective tools for learning” in the college classroom (Sargent, 2006, p. 72). Argentinean filmmaker Fernando Solanas (Solanas & Volpi, 1969) has famously asserted that the key to a successful film is the passion it evokes in those who view it. The use of internet-based films and videos in the social policy classroom emotionally bonds “digital natives” to course content and helps them make significant connections to important information that they will build upon throughout their social work education and in their professional careers.

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